

Matthew 1:18-24

¹⁸ Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. ²¹ She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. ²⁵ He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

Context

Our gospel is the traditional reading for the 4th Sunday of Advent (year A) and thus, in addition to its biblical context, this reading also carries a seasonal meaning.

A Seasonal Context

The Fourth Sunday of Advent always tells part of the story that just precedes the birth of Christ. These familiar episodes set the stage for one of the Bible’s best-known passages, the story of Christmas. This reading, as well as the gospels for the 4th Sunday in Advent in the other years, aligns well with the readings of the seven days of Advent that immediately precede Christmas. Not only do the readings for the daily Masses just before Christmas include the beginnings of the Gospel infancy narratives (Matthew 1 on Dec. 17-18; Luke 1 on Dec. 19-24), but we again get to hear the traditional “O Antiphons,” at Mass.

Most familiar these days from the popular hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” the “O Antiphons” are more than a thousand years old. Curiously, the first verse of the familiar hymn is actually the last of the traditional “O Antiphons” while the other verses of the hymn (in the order printed in most hymnals) correspond to the Antiphons for Dec. 17 to 22:

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| Dec. 17: O Sapientia / O Wisdom
Verse 2: O Come, Thou Wisdom, from on high | <i>from Evening Prayer
from the popular hymn</i> |
| Dec. 18: O Adonai / O Sacred Lord of ancient Israel
Verse 3: O Come, O Come, Thou Lord of might | |
| Dec. 19: O Radix Jesse / O Flower of Jesse’s stem
Verse 4: O Come, Thou Rod of Jesse’s stem | |
| Dec. 20: O Clavis David / O Key of David
Verse 5: O Come, Thou Key of David, come | |
| Dec. 21: O Oriens / O Radiant Dawn
Verse 6: O Come, Thou Dayspring from on high | |
| Dec. 22: O Rex Gentium / O King of all the nations
Verse 7: O Come, Desire of nations... | |
| Dec. 23: O Emmanuel / O Emmanuel
Verse 1: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel | |

The gospel readings for the 4th Sunday, the gospels for those weekday readings, and the “O Antiphons”

all begin to answer the question of Advent: who is coming? Our gospel reading for the 4th Sunday of Advent (Year A) provides its contribution to the larger answer: *Jesus Christ* (v.18), son of Mary (v.18), adopted son of Joseph (v.20), *son of David* (v.20), named *Jesus* (v.21), the one who *will save his people from their sins* (v.21), and *Emmanuel... God with us* (v.22).

An Old Testament Context

A key element of the biblical context is Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14 in v.23 of the gospel. In the Christian understanding we are called to see the prophesy given centuries before to Isaiah now come to messianic fulfillment in Jesus. The first reading for this Advent Sunday, Isaiah 7:10-14, contains the kernel of the Matthean reference: *The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying: Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God* (Is 7:10)

King Ahaz. Ahaz was the great-great-grandson of Saul, the first king of the tribes of Israel. Ahaz reigned as King of Judah ("the southern kingdom") in the mid-to-late 8th century BCE. His name (*·āḥāz*) is a shortened form of names such as Ahaziah and Jehoahaz, "the LORD holds." These names probably reflect confidence in God's imminent presence, as in Ps 73:23, "I am always with you, you hold (*·āḥaztā*) my right hand."

The opening verse of Isaiah 7 refers to the campaign of Syria (Aram) and northern Israel (Ephraim, "the northern kingdom") against Judah during the reign of Ahaz. The campaign in question took place between 735 and 733 B.C.E. (see 2 Kings 16) and is known as the Syro-Ephraimite war. Syria and Israel had already been paying tribute to Assyria since 738 B.C.E. but had now decided to revolt by withholding payment. Judah had refused to join the alliance. As yet Ahaz had no quarrel with Assyria, and in any case hopes of success were remote. Israel and Syria then attempted to overthrow Ahaz and replace him with a king more amenable to their wishes.

What is important to our understanding is that rather than rely upon God, Ahaz submitted to Assyrian power as its protector. While that enabled Judah to survive the catastrophe which overtook the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.E., it took the God's chosen people farther from the covenant. It was not only in this matter that Ahaz led the people astray. The Books of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles detail his reign and provide an assessment of King Ahaz:

- He placed an altar from Damascus into the Jerusalem temple (2 Kings 16:10–16) and began to introduce Canaan indigenous cultic worship, thus perverting the worship of God. Ahaz's sacrificial cult is described in 2 Chronicles 28:23 as being carried out in honor of the "gods of Damascus."
- Ahaz is also seen as reviving the cult of child sacrifice associated with Molech. The phrase "he made his son pass through the fire" is taken as a reference to child sacrifice rather than some ritual ordeal.
- He is condemned with the standard assessment that "he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD ...,"
- Even further, as a King of Judah, is further reviled by being compared in his wickedness to the kings of the north/Israel/Ephraim (2 Kings 16:3; see 2 Kings 8:18).

Ahaz added significantly to this spiral of decline of the covenant people – so much so that 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles devote significantly more verses to his condemnation than the usual reign of a Judean king. The significance of 2 Kings 16 is that it stands immediately before the important editorial section in 2 Kings 17 detailing the destruction of the Northern Kingdom ("Israel") for its apostasy. The present context, therefore, highlights that the Southern kingdom is progressing at an ever increasing rate to be an apostate state, soon to meet a similar fate.

Ahaz and the prophet Isaiah. This is the “Ahaz” of Isaiah 7, our first reading. In this context it is easy to see why the prophet Isaiah views Ahaz as one who lacks faith and trust in God, and in this way the king becomes a symbol of the people of God, who is the face of the Assyrian threats are becoming a people who also lack faith and trust in God. The king and the people depended upon an ideology of the Davidic dynasty as the sign of their “covenant” with God. Their ideology professed a sublime confidence God would protect his chosen king and city...not matter what. This ideology can be seen in Psalm 46:1–4:

*God is our refuge and our strength,
an ever-present help in distress.
Therefore we fear not, though the earth be shaken
and mountains plunge into the depths of the sea
The Lord of hosts is with us;
our stronghold is the God of Jacob.*

Such a profession is easily made when there is no immediate danger. Faced with an actual invasion, however, “*the heart of the king and the heart of the people trembled, as the trees of the forest tremble in the wind*” (Isa 7:2).

At this juncture Isaiah goes to meet Ahaz, who is apparently checking his water supply in anticipation of a siege. Isaiah is accompanied by his son, whose name, Shear-jashub, means “a remnant shall return” – perhaps ironically pointing to the future days of exile? Isaiah’s advice to the king is startling. He does not suggest the course that Ahaz would eventually take, to appeal to Assyria for help (2 Kings 16:7). Instead, he tells him to “*remain tranquil and do not fear*” (7:4) because the attack will not succeed and the state of northern Israel will soon come to an end. The divine commitment to make the Davidic line “*firm*” (2 Sam 7:16) is conditional on the faith of the king.

The Birth of a Child. Isaiah then offers Ahaz a sign to assure Ahaz that if he remains faithful to God and trusts in the power and ways of God, then Ahaz’s reign will remain *firm*. The king knows that to ask for a sign means he must give up control and trust God. Isaiah proceeds to give it even when the king refuses to ask for it. The sign is that a young woman will bear a son who will be “*living on curds and honey by the time he learns to reject the bad and choose the good*” (7:15). The mother is called an *almah* in the Hebrew, that is, a young woman of marriageable age, though not necessarily a virgin. The Greek translation of Isaiah used the word *parthenos*, which means “virgin” unambiguously, and this translation is cited in Matt 1:22–23 and formed the basis of the traditional Christian interpretation of this text as a prophecy of the birth of Christ. The Hebrew language version of Isaiah, however, does not suggest that the birth in itself was miraculous.

Since the sign was given to Ahaz, we must assume that the young woman in question was known to him. There are two possible identifications. The first is the prophet’s wife. We know that the prophet gave symbolic names to his children. The second is the king’s wife. The name Immanuel, “God is with us,” could serve as a slogan for the Davidic house. While the prophet could predict the name of his own child more confidently, a royal child would be the more effective sign for the king. While either identification is possible, it seems more probable that the woman in question was one of Ahaz’s wives.

The child about to be born will be “*living on curds and honey by the time he learns to reject the bad and choose the good*” (7:15). While this is a disputed point, the majority of scholars hold that “*by the time*” refers to a young child of 3 to 6 years old. This gives the sign some urgency, “*For before the child learns to reject the bad and choose the good, the land of those two kings whom you dread shall be deserted.*” In other words, if Ahaz is patient and trusts, within a few years his two enemies, Syria and Israel/Ephraim will be defeated

The Meaning of the Sign. The land of Israel was proverbially “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8; 13:5; Num 13:27; Josh 5:6). Such food would appear abundant to nomads from the wilderness; it would surely seem spartan to a king accustomed to live in luxury. The implications of the diet of curds and honey can be seen in Isa 7:21–25: those who remain in the land will have to live on its natural produce, since cultivation will be impossible. Curds and honey will be the only available food. The phrase “*On that day*” (7:20, 21) suggests that the coming destruction is “*the day of the Lord,*” but it is clear that the instrument of destruction is “*the razor hired from across the River*” (7:20) — the Assyrians. Isaiah not only predicts that Syria and Israel will be destroyed but also that Judah will suffer “*days worse than any since Ephraim seceded from Judah*” (7:17). It would seem from 7:18–20 that the real menace to Judah is seen to come from the Assyrians rather than from the Syro-Ephraimite coalition.

What, then, is signified by the birth of Immanuel? Evidently the name “God is with us” is not a promise that God will shelter the king from all harm if only he has faith; rather, it is an ambivalent sign. The presence of God is not always protective. It can also be destructive, as on the “*day of the Lord.*” Yet it is not entirely destructive. The birth of a child is perhaps the most universal and enduring symbol of hope for the human race. The newborn child does not contribute to military defense or help resolve the dilemmas of the crisis, but he is nonetheless a sign of hope for a new generation. The prophet predicts that he will reach the age of discernment, however bad the times may be. Even if cultivation becomes impossible, people will survive on curds and honey. Moreover, they can recall a time at the beginning of Israel’s history when such a diet was seen as a bountiful gift of God. Isaiah prophesies that the vineyards, worth thousands of pieces of silver, will be overgrown with thorns and briars. This would be a loss to the ruling class but not necessarily to the common people. The demise of the vineyards might mark a return to a simpler lifestyle, in which Israel and Judah would be less wealthy, but also less torn by social oppression and less entangled in international politics.

Isaiah’s advice to Ahaz, then, is to wait out the crisis, trusting not for miraculous deliverance but for eventual survival. The prophet probably feels that there is no need to fight against Syria and Israel, Assyria will take care of them. Sending for aid to Assyria is probably also unnecessary and would bring Judah directly into subjection. In the meantime Judah might be ravaged and reduced to near wilderness, but life would go on, and the society would be purified in the process.

Ahaz, of course, does not follow Isaiah’s advice. He sends gold and silver to the king of Assyria and becomes his vassal. Damascus is destroyed. Samaria survives only because a coup puts a new king on the throne, but even then it survives for a mere decade. The politics of Ahaz seem to work well enough for the present, but Isaiah would surely hold that they do not go to the heart of the matter.

The figure of Immanuel in Isaiah 7 is not presented as a messianic figure, although he probably was a royal child. Nothing is said of his future reign. Instead, he is a symbol of hope in weakness, of new life in the midst of destruction. When early Christianity read this passage as a prediction of the birth of Jesus, it implied an analogy between the two births. In the Gospels, too, a birth in inauspicious circumstances was nonetheless taken as a sign of the presence of God.

A New Testament Context

Our passage follows immediately upon Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17) – which notably says in v.9, “*Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah.*” Our gospel and Matthew’s genealogy are intentionally connected by Matthew. Our translation in Mt 1:1 is

“*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*”

A more literal translation would be,

“A book of the **genesis** of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.”

Matthew could have used other words for “genealogy” or “birth,” but he used this word, which is also the Greek title of the first book of scriptures. Similar wording is in the LXX at Gn 2:4 “This is the book of the **genesis** of heaven and earth;” and in 5:1 “This is the book of the **genesis** of human beings. In the day God made Adam, according to the image of God he made him.” Matthew intended a connection between these two sections of chapter 1 and with the first book of scriptures. This is a new beginning, a new creation.

In this new creation there is something different. Throughout verses 1-16a, Matthew has used *egennesen* 39 times (aorist, active of *gennaō*, which means: when used of the male role = “to beget,” or “to become the father of”; of the female role: “to give birth”). In 16b the grammar changes. He does not write, “Joseph begat Jesus,” which we might expect after 39 times; but rather he uses *egennethe* (aorist, *passive* of *gennaō*) “*the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah.*” We already have a hint that there is something different about this birth from all those that went before.

The genealogy at the beginning of the Gospel establishes Jesus’ place within the Jewish tradition. Jesus is the son of Abraham and of David as well as the continuation of David’s line after the exile of 587 B.C.E. Israel’s history is traced from its beginning with Abraham (v.2), through its high point with King David (v.6) and its low point in the Babylonian Exile (v.11), to its fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah (v.16). Thus the genealogy of Jesus stresses the continuity of Jesus with the great figures of God’s people (“son of Abraham ... son of David”), and it also prepares for the very irregular and indeed unique birth narrated in verses to follow.

Commentary

Joseph and Jesus

Matthew’s gospel does not describe the birth of Jesus, but explains his origin (the virgin conception) and his name in relation to a specific Old Testament prophecy. The passage concentrates entirely on the experiences of Joseph rather than those of Mary. Even the miraculous conception of Jesus is related only as its discovery affected Joseph. This remarkable concentration, compared with the complete silence on Joseph elsewhere, indicates Matthew’s concern to establish Jesus’ legal lineage through Joseph, i.e. to explain how the preceding genealogy applies to Jesus the son of Mary.

Jesus is “son of David” because of his genealogy, yet Joseph didn’t “begat” him! The Davidic descendancy is not transferred through natural paternity but through legal paternity. “By naming the child, Joseph acknowledges him as his own. The Jewish position on this is lucidly clear and is dictated by the fact that sometimes it is difficult to determine who begot a child biologically. Since normally a man will not acknowledge and support a child unless it is his own, the law prefers to base paternity on the man’s acknowledgment. The Mishna *Baba Bathra* 8:6 states the principle: ‘If a man says, “This is my son,” he is to be believed.’ Joseph, by exercising the father’s right to name the child (cf. Luke 1:60-63), acknowledges Jesus and thus becomes the legal father of the child” (Brown, p. 139).

The Virgin Birth

That Jesus was conceived by a virgin mother without the agency of Joseph is clearly stated throughout this section, and is the basis for the introduction of the quotation in vv. 22–23.

²² *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:* ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.”

In the text this not so much argued or even described, but assumed as a known fact. There may be an

element of apologetic in Matthew's stress on Joseph's surprise, his abstention from intercourse, the angel's explanation of Jesus' divine origin, and the scriptural grounds for a virgin birth, due perhaps to an early form of the later Jewish charge that Jesus' birth was illegitimate (see Brown, pp. 534–542). But the account reads primarily as if designed for a Christian readership, who wanted to know more precisely how Mary's marriage to Joseph related to the miraculous conception of Jesus, and Christians who would find the same delight that Matthew himself found in tracing in this the detailed fulfillment of prophecy.

The suggestion that the virgin birth tradition is an imaginative creation by Matthew or his predecessors on the basis of Isaiah 7:14 is precluded not only by this assumption of it as a known fact in Matthew's narrative, but also by its appearance in a completely different form in Luke 1:26–56; 2:5. Further, vv. 22–23, where Isaiah 7:14 is introduced, are clearly an explanatory addition to the narrative, which would flow smoothly from v. 21 to v. 24 without these verses, and not the inspiration for it. Suggestions that the tradition derives from pagan stories of gods having intercourse with women ignore both the quite different tone of such stories, and the impossibility of their being accepted in a Palestinian Jewish setting; yet the Gospel accounts are both intensely Jewish in their contents and expression.

Betrothal

Engagement or betrothal in Jewish society of Jesus' time involved a much stronger commitment than it does in modern Western society. The description of Joseph's embarrassment and his plans in vv.18–19 may presume his suspicion that Mary had been raped or seduced. As a devout observer of the Old Testament law, Joseph could not take Mary as his wife (see Deut 22:23–27). Not wishing to subject Mary to the shameful trial of the woman suspected of adultery (Num 5:11–31), he decided to forgo the public procedure and took upon himself the responsibility for the divorce. (The "Notes" section contains more information on Jewish betrothal/marriage customs and divorce.)

God's Plan

Joseph's plans are interrupted in vv.20–23 by the appearance of a messenger from God in a dream — a device familiar from the Old Testament account of the birth of Samson (Judges 13). The first words uttered are "*do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.*" The angel gives an explanation for Mary's pregnancy, announcing the divine plan is already in motion. The angel also informs Joseph of his part in the divine plan: "*you are to name him Jesus.*" As explained above, this simple directive makes clear to Joseph that he is to claim Jesus as his own. As the legal son of Joseph, Jesus will be a "Son of David" (v. 20).

In first-century Judaism the Hebrew name Joshua (Greek *Iesous*) meaning "Yahweh helps" was interpreted as "Yahweh saves." The language reminds us of similar revelations in the Old Testament (Gen. 16:11; 17:19; etc.), as well as of Isaiah 7:14, soon to be quoted. Names, especially divinely revealed names, are full of meaning, and this is often revealed by a word-play which need not always correspond to the actual etymology of the name. In the case of *Jesus* (the Greek form of *Joshua* or *Jeshua*, a common name) both the sound (cf. Heb. *yôšî'a*, 'he will save') and the probable etymology contribute to the explanation *for he will save his people from their sins* (v.20).

²² *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:* ²³ "*Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,*" which means "*God is with us.*"

Matthew also sees the virgin birth and naming as a fulfillment of scripture (this is the first of 10 such "fulfillment" passages in Matthew). Here Isaiah 7:14 is the fulfillment text. As noted in the "Context" section, the Isaian passage had a its primary fulfillment in Isaiah's own time and was not primarily a prediction of an event centuries later. But Matthew sees Jesus as a fulfillment of the whole of

Scripture.

Eugene Boring (*Matthew*, 135) observes Matthew's use of this text has four characteristics that made it appropriate:

“(1) the original oracle was addressed to the “House of David” (Isa 7:2, 13). (2) Matthew's faith affirms that Jesus is the one in who the promised deliverance is realized, in and through whom “God is with us.” (3) Since the LXX had translated *almah* with *parthenos*...which means primarily “virgin” but can also mean “young woman,” this provided another point of contact with Jesus. It is clear that Matthew already knew the story of Jesus' virginal conception, which he now understands in the light of Scripture as its fulfillment. (4) The LXX had employed the future tense (the tense of the Hebrew is ambiguous and can mean that the young woman is already pregnant or will become pregnant. The LXX translators may have had the virgin Israel specifically in mind (cf. Amos 5:2), Who by God's help would bring forth the Messiah. Matthew changes the LXX's second person singular, “you shall call,” to third person plural...Since third person plural is one of the Jewish circumlocutions to avoid pronouncing the sacred name of God, and since naming in a Jewish context has to do with essential being and not merely labeling, Matthew's meaning is probably “God will constitute him the one who represents the continuing divine presence among the people of God.”

Perhaps as a prelude to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Joseph is facing a “you-have-heard-it-said-but-I-say-to-you” tension. The tension between what Joseph understands the Law to demand and the new thing that Joseph is doing in Jesus. By Joseph's decision to obey the startling and unexpected command of God, he is already living the heart of the law and not its letter, already living out the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom. Joseph acts in accordance with the divine communication and takes Mary to be his wife (v. 24).

The whole of Matt 1:1–25 serves both to situate Jesus firmly within God's people and to call attention to his extraordinary status. On the one hand, he is the descendant of Abraham and David and the fulfillment of the promises and hopes attached to those great Old Testament figures. On the other hand, the mode of his birth is highly unusual, and the names given to him — Jesus and Emmanuel — suggest that he far surpasses any of his ancestors.

Some Reflections

The virginal conception of Jesus can not stand as a proof of the Christian claim that Jesus is the “Son of God.” It is not a matter of “proof” but trust. Nor does Matthew seem to intend it as such. Matthew bases no theological claims upon the virgin birth and the birth is never again a reference in his gospel. Yet the claim of supernatural conception is not incidental. It is one of the ways Matthew has of confessing that Jesus is the Son of God. Matthew has others, e.g. the Apostle Peter confesses the fundamental Christian faith that Jesus is “*the Christ, the son of the living God*” (16:16) because it was revealed to him by God in heaven. In the whole of Scripture, for Matthew, the story of Jesus is speaking about God – that God is with us.

Matthew begins and ends his narrative with the fragile human life of Jesus surrounded by God in both the birth story and the Passion account – each of which points to God as the hidden actor of the deeper story. While the Passion narrative is essential, the birth story as a miracle is not. As provocative as that sounds, the virginal conception is not the proof or even the meaning of the Christian claim that Jesus is the “Son of God.”

Notes

Matthew 1:18 *birth*: The Greek *genesis* is used. The normal and routine use of the word is “birth,” (Mt. 1:18. Lk. 1:14), with such derived senses as a. “what has come into being” and “life” (cf. perhaps Jms. 1:23). It is noteworthy that *bíblōs genéseos* is used for “genealogy” in Mt. 1:1.

Jesus: Many early manuscripts do not include “Jesus” saying “...*this is how the birth of the Christ came about.*” In any case what is clear is Matthew’s intention to emphasize the Messiahship of Jesus, son of Mary.

***betrothed to Joseph*:** betrothal was the first part of the marriage in which there was a formal exchange of vows before witnesses (cf. Mal 2:14) and a subsequent taking of the bride into the groom’s family home (cf. Mt 25:1-13). In Jewish law betrothal, which lasted about one year, was much more than our engagement. It was a binding contract, terminable only by death (which left the betrothed a ‘widow’) or by a divorce as for a full marriage. While “marriage” is often used to designate the second step, in Jewish understanding “marriage” is more properly applied to the first step. The man was already the *husband* (v. 19), but the woman remained in her father’s house. The marriage was completed when the husband took the betrothed to his home in a public ceremony (v. 24; cf. 25:1–13).

According to Mishnah *Kethuboth* 1:5 and TalBab *Kethuboth* 9b, 12a – in parts of Judea it was not unusual for a husband to be alone with his wife in the interval between the exchange of consent and the move to the groom’s home. Thus in Judea interim marital relations were not absolutely condemned. However, in Galilee, no such leniency was tolerated. The woman was expected to be a virgin upon entering his home. Given the tone of Matthew’s gospel, during the interim period any infidelity would have been considered adultery.

***lived together*:** *synérchomai*. In Acts 15:38 this word means “to journey with someone” on missionary work. In 1 Cor. 11:17 it denotes the coming together of the congregation; the sense is the same in 1 Cor. 14:23, 26, where Paul is giving direction for the proper use of spiritual gifts in the church. Used here in Matthew it can have the plain meaning; some commentaries opt for the euphemism of sexual intercourse, but there is scant evidence that this expression is Hebraic or Aramaic in its origin. However, in later use (e.g., Josephus and Philo) *synérchomai* is used euphemistically for sexual relations.

***through the holy Spirit*:** This information is provided to the reader prior to the narrative flow of the story of Joseph, his dream and the message of an angel. Matthew seems to have placed this phrase here so that (a) the listener knows more than the characters in the narrative, and (b) there is no point at which the listener entertains the idea that Joseph might be the natural father.

That the *Holy Spirit* was the agent in Jesus’ conception (cf. v. 20) is stressed also by Luke (1:35). In the Old Testament the Spirit of God appears as the agent of God’s activity, especially in creation and the giving of life (Gen. 1:2; Ezek. 37:1–14; etc.); thus the divine initiative is made clear. The agency of the Spirit in bringing the Messianic age (Isa. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1; Joel 2:28; etc.) is also in view.

Matthew 1:19 *a righteous man*: Fr. Raymond Brown (*Birth of the Messiah*, 126-7) suggests that of the wide array of underlying reasons for “righteousness” (e.g., mercy, awe, etc.) the key factor was that as a devout observer of the Mosaic law, Joseph wished to break his union with someone whom he suspected of gross violation of the law. It is commonly said that the law required him to do so, but the texts usually given in support of that view, e.g., Deut 22:20-21 do not clearly pertain to Joseph’s situation.

unwilling to expose her to shame: In Old Testament law the penalty for unchastity before marriage was stoning (Deut. 22:13–21), but by Joseph’s time divorce, based on Deuteronomy 24:1, was the rule. Joseph, as a *reighteous man*, could, and perhaps should, have done so by an accusation of adultery resulting in a public trial, but his unwillingness to *put her to shame* led him to consider the permitted alternative of a divorce before two witnesses (Mishnah, *Sotah* 1:1, 5). The sense of the underlying Greek is that the shame would be quite public. As a practical matter, given Mary was pregnant, the matter would eventually be public knowledge. What is not clear is the grounds that Joseph would have presented. The penalty for proved adultery was death by stoning; cf Deut 22:21-23. Some scholars speculate that Joseph would have offered less serious grounds (Brown, 128).

Matthew 1:20 the angel of the Lord: in the Old Testament a common designation of God in communication with a human being (cf. Gen 16:7, 13; 22:11, 14; Ex 3:2, 4; Judges 6:12, 14; Hosea 12:5; Isa 63:9)

in a dream: the expression *kat’ onar* is used in 2:13, 19, 22. These dreams may be meant to recall the dreams of Joseph, son of Jacob the patriarch (Genesis 37:5-11:19). A closer parallel is the dream of Amram, father of Moses, related by Josephus (*Antiquities* 2,9,3; 212, 215-16).

son of David: It was necessary for Joseph to take Mary (to his house, i.e. complete the marriage) in order to establish Jesus’ legal Davidic lineage. Similarly, to name him (vv. 21, 25) was formally to acknowledge Jesus as his son, and thus to constitute Jesus also as ‘Son of David’ (Brown, pp. 138–139).

Matthew 1:21 Jesus: the Hebrew name Joshua (Greek *Iesous*) meaning “Yahweh helps” was interpreted as “Yahweh saves.” In addition, some scholars have pointed out that in being named “Joshua” there is another important theme being developed in Matthew’s story. Joshua inherited and fulfilled Moses’ role. The Matthean typology of Jesus as the “new Moses” is developed throughout the remainder of this gospel.

Matthew 1:23 God is with us: God’s promise of deliverance to Judah in Isaiah’s time is seen by Matthew as fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, in whom God is with his people. The name Emmanuel is alluded to at the end of the gospel where the risen Jesus assures his disciples of his continued presence, “. . . I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Matthew 1:24 he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded. Joseph is a model of quiet obedience to three angelic revelations in Matt 1–2 (cf. 2:13–15, 19–21). He got up and did exactly as he was told without hesitation or question. This parallels Mary’s humble obedience in Luke 1:38.

Matthew 1:25 until she bore a son: the evangelist is concerned to emphasize that Joseph was not responsible for the conception of Jesus. In English is something is negated up to a point in time, occurrence after that time is normally assumed. However, the expression (*heōs hou*) and its Semitic counterpart have no such assumption. The immediate context favors a lack of future implication given Matthew’s stress on Mary’s virginity so that the Isaian prophecy is fulfilled.

Sources

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