

December 20, 2009/ Matthew 1:18-2:6 (ESV¹)

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Jewish marriage proceeded through an engagement, to a betrothal, to the "full-fledged" married state ... an engagement was something that was often arranged by parents for fairly young people ... engagements were serious, but not binding ... but at the time that a betrothal was made, matters changed ... couples exchanged wedding vows and they were legally married ... the only way to dissolve a betrothal was through a divorce ... if one party died during the betrothal, the other was considered widowed ... the betrothal typically lasted for a period of 1 year ... during that time, though the man and woman were pledged to each other and legally man and wife, the woman continued to live with her parents and they were not intimate ... only after the period of betrothal was over, did the woman come into the man's house and did they physically consummate the marriage ... the intention here is that we understand that Mary and Joseph were in this "in between" state of betrothal ... they were pledged, legally man and wife, but not living together and not physically intimate ...

during this time, Mary is found to be pregnant ... we (and Mary) know that it is the work of God's Holy Spirit ... Joseph, on the other hand, doesn't know this ... what a heart-rending situation for both Mary and Joseph ... Mary knows what's happening, but how can she hope to have it make sense to Joseph or anyone else? ... there's no indication here that she even tries to explain to Joseph ... what, after all, is it going to sound like if she tries???! ... it would appear to be the most monstrous of blasphemy! ... not only has she been immoral, an adulteress, but here she is trying to explain her way out of the thing by saying that it's God's doing!!! ... if Joseph or anyone else is going to believe her, God is going to have to intervene in a most direct and miraculous way ... Joseph, for his part, must be torn up ... the only "sensible" explanation of what's going on is that his dear young wife is an adulteress ...

¹⁹And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

this verse speaks volumes about the kind of man Joseph is ... this is a person who knows what is right, who knows and abides by the Law ... but he's also a tender and gentle person ... this is terribly serious and messy situation ... he's been hurt and apparently greatly wronged by someone that he clearly loves ... but he can't just ignore it, because to do so would make him appear to be unchaste too ... what's to do? ... he could he could save his own reputation by demanding the most severe penalty possible and public humiliation ... instead, he intends to take the matter only before 2 witnesses and simply divorce Mary ... even in that, there is a feeling of reluctance and sadness conveyed here ... between the lines are sleepless nights and real sadness ...

²⁰But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

this order is significant ... first Joseph determines to do right ... then God intervenes and gives him some understanding of the reality of the situation ... he doesn't get everything explained up front ... he has to agonize through the hard choices before he's given clarity ...

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notice too how the angel addresses Joseph ... as one standing in the royal line of descent! ... this is what Matthew established in the genealogy, and he *does* stand in David's line ... but remember that this is a rough carpenter in the backwoods town of Nazareth here! ... and an angel comes with a greeting like this!?! ... what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit ... the obvious and plain meaning of this is that Mary is pregnant without the aid of a human father ... mind-boggling ... miraculous ... wonderful ... and the absolutely clear intention of the announcement ...

21She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

according to Luke, Mary had already been told to name the baby Jesus ... but Joseph is going to be the legal father, and as such, it's his responsibility to name the child ... and he's told to name the boy Jesus ... Jeshua ... Joshua ... Yahweh saves ... the I AM is salvation ... "because he will save his people from their sins" ... **Psalm 130:8 And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. ...** He Himself will redeem Israel from all their sins ... the Psalm refers to Israel ... Matthew tells its it was broadened to "his" people, Messiah's people, be they Jew or Gentile ... this is going to be Messiah, but a Messiah for all people, One who will deal with our most fundamental problem ... our guilt before a completely righteous and holy God ...

note carefully too that even His name makes it clear that ultimately it is God who deals with our guilt before Himself ... it is the I AM/Yahweh who saves ...

Matthew, in typical fashion for him, moves immediately to remind us that this is consistent with the OT promises ...

22All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

this is the quote from the Septuagint version of **Isaiah 7:14** that we looked at last week ... the Hebrew word used in Isaiah in Hebrew doesn't necessarily mean virgin, but could mean only "maiden"/young unmarried girl ... and the short term fulfillment of that prophecy obviously did not involve a virgin birth ... but by the 3rd century BC the Greek translation of the OT used the word that Matthew uses here, that does specifically mean "virgin" ... the long term fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Jesus certainly does involve a virgin birth ... and in a way that was probably not even dreamed of by Isaiah ... they shall call his name "God with us" ... God with us clothed in humanity ... this Isaiah surely didn't understand completely, but Matthew did and is saying it in very clear terms ...

it's important that what Matthew's relating to us has the context of years of prophecy and waiting ... as Pastor Gary often points out, without that we are at the mercy of whatever crackpot that shows up on the scene claiming a special place for him or herself ... there is a huge difference between someone saying "I'm the one that others have been promising for hundreds of years, check to see that I've got the goods" and somebody saying "Hey, I'm a total surprise, disjoint from the record of God's dealing with humanity ... the only authentication you'll get for me is from my followers, but trust me!" ...

24When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,

Joseph has a most tender heart ... he obeys ... it can't altogether make sense to him at this point ... it probably never did in his lifetime (assuming as most do that he died before Jesus began His ministry) ... but he doesn't hesitate ... it is probably with great relief and real joy that he assumes his God-ordained role as Mary's husband and the earthly father of Jesus ... Mary's character has in reality been vindicated, and he's ready to face with her whatever innuendoes and crude remarks come with the awkward situation that they are in ... he's probably ready to end the betrothal early so as to become the legal father of Jesus ...

25but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

again, Matthew wants to leave no possibility of misunderstanding of the miraculous nature of what he is saying ...

Mat 2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,

Magi/wise men ... who were these guys? ... they seem to be "holy men," probably from Persia/Babylon ... they would have been learned men/philosophers/natural scientists/astrologers ... every indication here is that these were honorable, if pagan, fellows ... there is no indication that they were magicians or sorcerers ... instead it seems as if they have some knowledge (gained perhaps from the Jewish exiles in Babylon?) of God's promise to send a Messiah to the Jews ... they came after the birth of Jesus, during the time of King Herod ... this is "Herod the Great" ... he was a guy who had proved loyal to the Romans during an uprising in Palestine, and whose loyalty was rewarded with first a governorship, and then later being named king ... he was a builder ... building great public works, including the temple in Jerusalem that is the setting of many of the Gospel scenes ... he was in some ways generous, selling some of his own gold to buy food for the Jewish people during one period of famine ... but he was also quite paranoid and completely ruthless when it came to the matter of protecting his throne ... he had a number of the members of his own household (including his favorite wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, uncle and many others) killed when he suspected them of being interested in having his throne ... this very dark and sick side of his nature was so notorious that Augustus Caesar is recorded as saying that it was better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son ... Herod reigned from about 40 BC to 4 BC ... as you probably know, an error made in the middle ages prevents our calendars from being synchronized so that Christ's birth would fall in 1 BC or AD ...

Mat 2:2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

these gentile wise men have made a considerable trip in search of the baby Jesus ... they have come to see the one they understand is to be the King of the Jews ... it is interesting and important for us to know that not only were the Jews expecting Messiah at this time in history, but it was a fairly widespread expectation in gentile circles as well, that a world leader was to come from the Jewish nation ... this is important enough to these guys that they have made a trip that people speculate would have taken weeks, if not months ...

they're looking for a prince, so the natural place for them to go is to the royal city ... imagine their puzzlement as they walk around in Jerusalem, expecting people to know of the birth of a prince, but where no one has a clue what they're talking about ...

notice too what they say ... "born king of the Jews" ... Matthew has given us the genealogy ... the kingship isn't something later conferred on Jesus ... He is the legitimate king of Israel from birth ... in

contrast to the crazy man occupying the throne by Roman appointment ... Matthew has detailed in the genealogy that Jesus deserves royal honor ... in Chapter 2 he shows that He is given it by these gentile wise men ...

the star in the east ... there has been speculation for years as to what they saw ... some people speculate that it was a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter that occurred in 7 BC ... others point to a visit of Halley's comet ... there is nothing to say that it has to be any of these ... but whatever it was, these guys understood from the LORD that what they saw was to announce the birth of Messiah ...

there's really not much detail here ... we don't know exactly who they were, where they came from, or even how many of them there are ... we don't know exactly what they saw in the sky ... what we do know is the central fact that they came to worship Him ...

Mat 2:3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

Herod was extremely paranoid, and had gotten increasingly so as he'd gotten older ... if you're living in Jerusalem with a crazy man on the throne and he's upset, you'll be upset too ... who knows what lengths he will go to calm his rattled nerves this time? ...

Mat 2:4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

Mat 2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

Mat 2:6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

the Jewish scholars quote from **Micah 5:2** ... Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, the "house of bread" ... God's bread from heaven was to come to earth in "the city of David" ... this little town was only 5 miles or so from Jerusalem ... this is really pretty amazing when you step back and look at it ... here are these pagan, gentile Magi, who have traveled hundreds of miles after seeing a star and somehow understanding that Messiah was born ... in Jerusalem a couple hour's walk from Bethlehem everybody's in a dither, but it's not important enough for them to go and check things out for themselves ... in John's gospel he says

Joh 1:11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Joh 1:12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

if anyone should have scurried off to Bethlehem to worship, it should have been devout Jews ... but it wasn't, it was instead honest gentiles hearts ... the chief priests and teachers of the law have light (they have answered the inquiry absolutely correctly!) but they are dodging it ... the Magi have only a little light, but they are embracing it ...