

Was Jesus born to an unmarried couple?

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In common speech, it is always told that Jesus was the child of Mary and Joseph, a married couple that were on their way to Israel's first census, when she gave birth. However, as of Luke 2:5 "ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριάμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένῃ αὐτῷ, οὓση ἐγκύω." (Nestle GNT 1904) or "ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριάμ τῇ μεμνηστευμένῃ αὐτῷ γυναικί, οὓση ἐγκύω." (Scriveners Textus Receptus 1894 which equals to Stephanus 1550 in this passage) – Mary was betrothed (ἐμνηστευμένη/μεμνηστευμένη) to him (αὐτῷ) – i.e. Joseph – being (οὓση) with a child. The word ἐμνηστευμένη which is often translated with betrothed shows that something is incomplete and that their marriage was not yet completely fulfilled. The English NIV translates Luke 2:5 as "Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child." Other versions such as the NRSV use the word 'engaged' in this context. In Biblical times, the Israelites used to conduct arranged marriages, so love marriages were unknown. The parents used to choose a partner without the couple's consent and they had to get through a waiting period of sometimes more than a year, as sexual activity before marriage was out of question. As such Matthew 1:18 reveals "His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit." (NIV). However, verse 19 already reveals the problem of ancient time "Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly." (NIV)

As such, the couple was according to Luke just engaged and Mary became pregnant, and therefore Joseph has adultery in his mind. In Matthew 1:20, Joseph then had a dream in which the angel Gabriel convinced him to accept the child since it was foreseen by God. If we just focus on Matthew 1:18-19, we get the information that Mary and Joseph did not have sexual contact and Joseph was not the father. As such, he assumes sexual misconduct by his fiancée. He wants to avoid her to be stoned to death as it was common by Jewish law (see Deuteronomy 22:23-24), and thus only thought of a divorce in mind. The mentioning of Joseph as 'husband' in Matthew 1:18 might go back to the Jewish custom that engaged people were already considered husband and wife even if the ceremony did not take place yet and Mary could have been punished for adultery like a married woman. In Luke 1:34, Mary is said to have known

‘no man’ and thus adultery is impossible and Jesus must be a child by God. However, as Joseph White points out: “Nothing about a vow is mentioned in Scripture. Mary’s response to the angel was based upon the fact that it was obvious that the angel was speaking about an immediate conception, and since Mary was at that time only engaged to Joseph, but not married, *at that time* she could not possibly conceive in a natural manner, since she did not ‘know a man’” (White, 1998: 31)

As of Luke 1:28, Mary was informed about her pregnancy by the angel Gabriel – who also informed Joseph – probably being in the 6th month of her pregnancy (and so her possible ‘misconduct’ was visible to others). Therefore, Gabriel informed Mary that she did not sin, but that God gave her the child and that her honour was not destroyed. He started with the Aramaic words “šlomlék bhtoolto Maryam” meaning „Hail, o virgin Mary!“ - “malyat taybooto“ meaning „full of grace“ (as of John 1:14). These are until today the beginning words of the Ave Maria, or šlomlék Mariam (שלום לך מרים) in Aramaic.

Let’s imagine for a moment that God did not exist, what would it mean for the historicity? We could assume that Mary was betraying her future husband and then tells a story about a prophecy that appeared to her to avoid being stoned to death when the pregnancy became visible. As the Jewish Canon proclaims that God will send a child on earth, it is the only way to make people convince that she did nothing wrong. At the same time, she would have spread amazement, since people were awaiting the messiah and the story would probably never be written down if it was just a common adultery. Certain mistrust concerning the virgin concept already appeared in Matthew as “Matthew’s Gospel asserts that Joseph did not father Jesus (Matt 1:18-25), but it is far from clear that Matthew believed in the virgin birth (despite the nearly universal use of “virgin” to translate, accurately or not, Matt 1:23). Whatever Matthew thought he knew about Jesus’ biological origins, he is careful to narrate that Joseph obeys the angel’s directives to go through with his marriage to Mary and to name Jesus (Matt 1:24-25). By doing so, Joseph accepts Jesus as his legal son, thus enabling him to inherit Joseph’s genealogy and to be rightfully considered a descendant of King David” (Miller, without year). Miller further points out that “Of the four Gospels then, only Matthew shows any interest in the question of whether Jesus was legitimate, and Matthew is quick to clarify that Joseph ‘adopted’ Jesus and so made him his legitimate heir.” (ibid.). Stephanie Landsem points out “Mary of Nazareth, unwed and pregnant, knew the punishment she faced—stoning. She had nothing but the story of an angel to tell her parents and Joseph, the man she had promised to marry. Joseph would have been well within his rights—even within his duty—to expose her sin and witness her execution. It was only with the intervention of an angel and

Joseph's own faith-filled acceptance of the angel's message, that saved both Mary's life and the life of her unborn baby, the Incarnation of God." (Landsem, 2013)

Bulbeck (1948) mentions that the apocryphal gospels even give a deep inside and the Book of James depicts Joseph in the moral dilemma whether he shall hide Mary's sin or make the pregnancy manifest, thus risking her to be condemned even in the case she is innocent and really bears a child of God. The birth of Jesus is an important topic in Christian Apocrypha mainly spread through the depictions of James (Protevangelium), Thomas as well as the Pseudo-Matthew. However, "If readers of these apocryphal texts could see the modern nativity scenes, they would be surprised to find the baby Jesus in a stable: In the infancy gospels, the birth takes place in a cave outside of Bethlehem [...]. They might have expected also to see a midwife in the scene; indeed, she does appear regularly in Eastern Orthodox depictions of the nativity, helping Mary bathe the newborn. As the *Protevangelium* tells it, Joseph left Mary in the cave and went into Bethlehem to find a midwife. But as Joseph and the midwife approached the cave, they saw a bright cloud overshadowing it. The cloud then disappeared into the cave and a great light appeared, which withdrew and revealed the baby Jesus" (Burke, 2014). Most accounts show a kind of magical scene, which sheds the light that Mary did not really give birth, but that it was rather a supernatural birth, so that she could keep her virginity. Burke further points out: "The apocryphal accounts agree with Luke that the shepherds visited the Holy Family shortly after Jesus' birth. In the Western texts, the family then moves from the cave to a stable and places the baby in a manger." (ibid.) In addition, the Pseudo-Matthew popularizes the image of a very young Mary and an older Joseph, something which is rather unlikely, though girls were married in a very young age. Even further, in ancient Israel, the term for "virgin" was also used to describe a young woman in general and even married women were called like that, so assuming her virginity just by this wording might be a trap.

To put it in a nutshell, Joseph and Mary were not married. They were just engaged, though the ancient Jewish engagement is not to be compared with modern engagements. The parents chose the partners, and marriage was merely a business or transaction. As such, the price for the bride was often not paid at once, but in several steps, and so were the contractual duties. During that phase, the bride was already promised to the groom including marital duties and was seen as married in vulgar language, though they had no full marital rights, such as sexual contact, since the marriage transaction was not finished yet. Only after all contractual duties were fulfilled and the price was paid, the marriage ceremony could take place and full marriage rights were installed. Since Joseph and Mary were just promised to each other, but not fully married, her pregnancy turned into a scandal and she had to justify herself to avoid being

stoned. We assume that the couple would not have received any attention if they were legally married, but since this was not the case, a public issue arose out of it. Mary went together with Joseph to the census to Bethlehem, but she probably gave birth in a cave before arriving. Joseph assumingly went to Bethlehem to ask for assistance and a midwife called Salome in the Gospel of James came to help them. They then went together to Bethlehem and rested in a stable to keep the child warm and healthy. Even though Joseph did not father the boy, he adopted him as of Matthew and raised him legally as his son and thus as his heir.

On the other hand, from an Orthodox point of view, women were seen as men's personal property and a woman committing adultery would never have been protected, especially since Joseph did not know Mary well and thus had no deep relation to her. This also means that in case that he was not the father, it is likely, that he must really have had a dream or something like this, confirming Mary's story as otherwise any compassion to save her was rather unlikely if seen through historical glasses.

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