

The narrative begins in the context of a betrothal between Mary (Jesus' mother) and Joseph. It is a grave mistake to make any sort of connection between this martial arrangement (*μνηστεύω*) and our western idea of an engagement. The two concepts have little to nothing in common. An engagement is a social agreement between a man and a woman with zero legal ramifications. While this is seen as a pledge that leads to marriage, the engagement comes with none of the protections, blessings, or responsibilities of marriage. As such, an engagement can be broken off without legal ramifications because no union has taken place. None of these things are true of a betrothal.

The situation described here as a betrothal is not a step that is leading up to marriage so much as it is the first step of the marriage already in effect. This custom secured a young girl while allowing her to reach physical maturity while also allowing the groom to secure a stable living. The maiden would remain living with her parents and the two would not yet enjoy the blessings of marital life, but she is now under the authority of her husband. Vows have already been taken. Dowries have already been paid. Any obligations that the marriage contract required have already been met. From a legal standpoint, Mary and Joseph are already married and yet have not yet come together. The indication is that they have not yet moved in together and thus have not yet had sexual congress. It is at this point that Mary was discovered to be with child.

Joseph is again presented as Mary's husband. As such, he must act. There is no passive response available to him. His wife is pregnant, and he knows that he is not the father. This is not something that can be ignored. This verse weighs Joseph's options.

Because he is a righteous man, Joseph cannot remain married to Mary. The idea is not that Joseph is inherently right before God of his own accord, but that he lives consistently in obedience to the law. He cannot marry a harlot. He is thinking not only of his reputation, but of the family he hopes to raise. What kind of a man would welcome an unfaithful woman into his home as the future mother of his children? She is not simply a lewd and loose woman. She is unfaithful, having broken her word and her bond to him. This woman will not do. Yet there is no reason to open this young girl to public shame.

The course that Joseph determined to take is the more honorable one. A trial would have vindicated him from any wrongdoing in the eyes of the community, yet at what price? A divorce was a simple affair in 1st century Judaea. All that is required is a written certificate from the husband placed into the hand of the woman in question in the presence of two witnesses. That's it. The marriage is now dissolved. This is the course that Joseph has resolved to follow. The indication is that less than twenty-four hours elapse between when Joseph discovered Mary's condition and when he determined what to do about it. First thing in the morning, he will put his plan into action.

Because Joseph is a righteous man, there is no reason to think that he is going to sit on this decision. He has evaluated the facts known to him and has come to a decision. That decision will be put into execution with the morning light. Yet, as the reader knows, there are certain facts that Joseph is not aware of. Now is the time for God to reveal to Joseph what the reader already knows.

“But after he had considered these things; 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. Because that which is begotten in her is by the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you will call His name ‘Jesus’ because He will save His people from their sins.’”

The scene is quite dramatic. Matthew leaves little time for any intervention. Joseph has already considered what to do and has determined to do it. With the morning will come a divorce. Yet after these things, Behold! The Hebraic *ἰδοὺ* is an attention getter (look!, behold!, check it out!). What follows is important, but also completely unexpected. An angel of the Lord does not normally appear in dreams to relay information. Maybe Joseph the son of Jacob should have expected to be a dreamer of dreams, but this does not seem to be the case.

The angel addresses Joseph as a prince of Israel. "Son of David" is a messianic title (only here used of someone not Jesus[5]) and a title of royalty. It is doubtful that Joseph had ever been called that before. By doing so, the angel tips his hand regarding the purpose of his visit. Joseph is a legitimate son of David. This child must also be a legitimate heir to David's throne. Joseph is required to make that happen, but he must play ball. For this reason, he is not just encouraged, but commanded to take Mary as his wife. The idea is not to marry her, but to complete the marriage by bringing her to his home. This command is running in the opposite direction of Joseph's plans. Why would he do such a thing? The angel continues by providing the reason (γὰρ). That which is in her is from the Holy Spirit. Now, Joseph knows all that the reader knows.

Of all the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, it is interesting that Matthew chose Isaiah 7:14. One might think that emphasizing Mary as the woman whose seed would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15) might be more fitting. After all, the angelic revelation explains why the seed is the woman's seed and not a man's seed. Yet Matthew points to Isaiah because the overarching point is to connect Jesus to David's line and that is the context of Isaiah 7.

Matthew's Understanding of Isaiah 7: Matthew's commentary could not be simpler. Mary is not like the young woman of Ahaz's day. She is the virgin prophesied to Ahaz. The child within her is not like the child promised to Ahaz. He is the child that is born in David's line but not in David's palace. This child is the literal fulfillment of God's presence with Israel because He was begotten by means of God the Holy Spirit. This is God with us! All these pieces begin to fall into place within Joseph's mind and he knows what he must do.

Joseph was on the verge of making some poor decisions, but only because his information was incomplete. Now that he understands the situation and is informed of the facts in their totality, he sets off to live as a righteous man ought: with immediate and continued obedience.

"After waking from sleep, Joseph did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took her as his wife."

Joseph completed his obedience by naming this son "Jesus." The child is now officially and legally a son of David by means of Mary, the wife of Joseph. According to Matthew's gospel, Joseph is the first person to respond in faith to Jesus as the Christ, the son of David and the son of Abraham.

Conclusion

It's amazing to consider how robust Joseph's biblical understanding must have been. He knew the implications of the virgin birth as associate with Isaiah 7:14 and the connection to the promised seed of the woman. He also understood his connection to the whole scenario as a son of David and the necessity of his role. It's almost as if Joseph were looking for this promised seed to come, or at least rested in the hope that He would come. The vast majority of Israel is awash with apostasy, yet there seems to be a few who remain as a faithful remnant. Joseph is identified by Matthew as the first to trust in Jesus as Israel's Messiah. He will not be the last.

Joseph's faith is demonstrated by his immediate and ongoing obedience. His actions would have certainly drawn negative attention. If Joseph knew Mary was pregnant, others would have noticed as well. Joseph was unconcerned with what the neighbors thought or said. He blocked out all else except for obedience to his Lord. Joseph sets the precedent for others to follow. Some who we meet in Matthew's gospel will follow this precedent. Sadly, most will not. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Faith in Jesus is not a slogan to be repeated. It is a life which is demonstrated by immediate and ongoing obedience. The faithful are the obedient, not the boisterous, flamboyant, popular, or mainstream. May we strive to be obedient.