

## **Matthew 1:18-25 : The Conception of Mary and the Birth of Christ**

*A Commentary by Max Klein*

**Matt. 1:18: Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: His mother, Mary had been contractually married to Joseph but before [emphatic form in the Greek] they had come together [in sexual intercourse], she was found to be pregnant from the source of the Holy Spirit.**

Mary was the mother of Christ's biological life. As the mother, she provided the physical ovum which contained 23 chromosomes while God the Holy Spirit provided 23 male chromosomes. When an ovum and a sperm are united, biological life is perpetuated. Thus, as Mary's ovum came in contact with the other 23 chromosomes provided by the Spirit, so began the biological life of Jesus.

Biological life is mortal. God created the first biological life from the dust (chemicals) of the soil. Biological life such as your muscles, bones, organs, nerves, etc. will upon death break down into the chemicals of the earth or air. Biological life came from chemicals and returns to chemicals (Eccl. 3:20).

Biological life precedes human life. In the garden God created first the biological life of Adam and then breathed into his nostrils a soul. This union of biological and soul-life resulted in Adam's human life (Genesis 2:7). After the fall, God delegated to mankind the responsibility to perpetuate the material, biological life which is formed in the womb. At birth God then creates the soul ex-nihilo (literally: 'out from nothing') and imputes it to biological life. As soon as the immortal soul-life unites with material (biological) life, human life begins.

Some people think that Mary was the mother of the deity of Christ, as if she were the creator of God. This is blasphemous and absurd for God is eternal and has no mother. Mary on the other hand was a descendant of Adam and thus was born a human being. The Lord Jesus Christ created Adam and his wife, and so Mary is the result of the Lord's creation, not vice versa!

### *Jewish Marriage:*

Jewish marriage took place in three stages: the contract, the ceremony, and the celebration. In the first stage, the marriage contract was signed by the parents of the groom and bride. After the contract had been signed and registered with the Jewish government, the couple was legally married, even though the ceremony and celebration may not take place for many months or even years. In the second stage of marriage, the ceremony, the groom and his male friends would ride in chariots to the home of the bride's parents (or some other designated place), and then the groom only would enter the home while his friends waited outside. At that point, there would be four people in the

home for this ceremony: the bride, her parents and the groom. Something similar to the following scenario would take place: the bride would be positioned a couple of paces ahead of her parents. When the groom entered the room, the father would step forward beside his daughter and make the following announcement to her as he pointed to the young man: "This is your husband and has been your husband since the date of the contract." Next he would say to the groom, "This is your wife." Then, the father, taking the bride by the arm, walked forward and presented her to the groom. The groom then looked at the bride, but said nothing, then looked at the father and said, "She is now my wife, and I am her husband now and forever more." (It is interesting to note that only the father and the groom spoke during the wedding ceremony.) The groom then took the bride's fingers and put them into the crook of his arm and they walked out together. He put her in his chariot and his friends followed in a procession through town. He would then go either to a home which he had prepared or to his parent's home. Waiting outside the home would be the bride's friends, the bridesmaids who would be holding lanterns and waiting for the returning groom, bride and groomsmen (compare with the marriage feast at the Second Advent: Matt. 25:1-13). The groom and bride would enter the home first followed by the groomsmen and lastly the bridesmaids. Then, there would be a wedding dinner and celebration which would last from several days to several weeks. At some point during the celebration, the couple would slip away and begin their honeymoon and consummate the marriage. (Regarding this subject you might want to listen to the Spiritual Dynamic Series 631 by R.B. Thieme Jr.)

*The Virgin Conception of Mary and Joseph's reaction:*

In this passage, Mary becomes pregnant apart from Joseph after being legally married to him via the contract signed by his and her parents. This was why Joseph was so concerned when he had discovered that she was pregnant. Since he knew that he did not bring about her pregnancy, he initially assumed that she had committed adultery. After he was informed in a dream by an angel of the Lord regarding the truth of this matter, he went ahead with the ceremonial phase of the marriage (Matthew 1:20).

**Matt. 1:19. Joseph, her husband, being virtuous [righteous] did not desire to make a public display of her. He desired secretly to divorce her.**

Joseph was not only moral, but also possessed the virtue acquired from the spiritual life. Morality was designed for the security, stability, protection and blessing of a group of people in a national entity and as such requires only human power and determination for execution. Virtue, on the other hand, relates to the inward function of the soul and comprises attributes such as grace-orientation, love for God the Father, unconditional love directed toward members of the human race and occupation with Christ.

Morality without virtue can very easily be corrupted (distorted) by arrogance resulting in a moral, but weak person. Morality combined with arrogance produces great self-righteousness. A self-righteous individual assumes that his morality equals perfection. From his imagined perch of perfection he evaluates, criticizes, judges, and maligns others. However, he is far from perfection. He understands neither God nor God's plan; he understands neither himself nor the people whom he judges and maligns.

Believers, and to some extent unbelievers can avoid this “moral degeneracy” related to the distortion of morality. With authority orientation and humility, moral unbelievers who possess some appreciation of grace can avoid much of the stench of self-righteousness. The believer on the other hand can go much further, for through the execution of the spiritual life he is able to remove self-righteousness and develop great virtue.

Joseph possessed and demonstrated this virtue obtained from the spiritual life. He didn't get angry at Mary when he first discovered she was pregnant. He didn't malign her. He didn't call her “a dirty and faithless adulteress” as other men, facing a similar situation would have. He didn't feel sorry for himself and say, “How could she do this to me?” He didn't become bitter and demand that she be stoned to death under the requirements of the Mosaic Law, which stated that adultery was not only a sin, but also a crime:

“If there is a virgin, betrothed [contractually married] to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death. The girl because she did not cry out in the city [she consented], and the man because he has violated his neighbor's wife. Thus, you shall purge the evil [adultery is more than a sin] from among you.” (Deuteronomy 22:23, 24)

Because Joseph was a man of great humility, he did not feel any personal disgrace in this matter. On the contrary, he was only concerned about Mary's feelings and security. He wanted to protect her from disgrace and personal harm. Therefore, he decided not to bring her before the Jewish court system, but to divorce her secretly. In a state of great humility and objectivity, he was able to apply grace toward his wife and so was able to avoid any subjective reaction.

Remember that God always treats us in grace. So, we should treat others in grace as well. You may say, “My wife (husband / boss / neighbor / friend) does not deserve to be forgiven.” Did we deserve salvation? Did we deserve to be forgiven of our pre-salvation-sins by God the Father (Isaiah 44:22; Ephesians 4:32)? Do we deserve this spiritual life given to all church age believers? First Corinthians 4:7 states, “What do you have that you did not receive?”

**Matt. 1:20. While he was thinking about these things [i.e. divorcing Mary and canceling the ceremony], behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take alongside [in the marriage ceremony] Mary, your wife, for what has been conceived in her is from the source of the Holy Spirit.”**

Once Joseph had the necessary information, he was able to make a rational decision. From this situation, we can learn the following principles: No one can make a correct decision if he does not have sufficient information; and, no one can make a rational decision unless he removes emotion from the decision making process. This concept can be explained by the following simple equation:

Sufficient facts - emotion = rational decision making

In the context of the discussion of Joseph's character we should go one step further, adding virtue to this formula.

Sufficient facts - emotion + virtue = virtuous and correct decision making

The sin nature is passed down to the offspring through the male sperm. (See: Fellowship with God, Volume 2, Essay: The Perfection of Christ by Max Klein.) So, if Joseph *had* participated in the pregnancy of Mary, Jesus would have been born with a sin nature.

**Because of this [an inference from what proceeded], just as through one man [Adam], the sin nature [αμαρτια / hamartia] entered into the world, and through the sin nature [came] [spiritual] death [because God imputed Adam's Original Sin to the sin nature] so death [spiritual death] spread to the entire human race because all sinned [when Adam sinned]. (Romans 5:12) (You may want to listen to Spiritual Dynamics series, lesson 613, 640 and 1243.)**

The Greek word "hamartia" in the singular usually should be translated "sin nature." On the other hand, when this word is found in the plural, it should be translated "sins." This should help explain the translation above as well as numerous other verses in Scripture.

#### *The Unique Birth of the God-Man:*

God is fair to mankind at birth and gracious in solving the problems connected with man's entrance into this world. When the fetus, which possesses the sin nature, emerges from the womb, God does two things simultaneously: He creates a soul and unites it with biological life which results in human life; and, He imputes Adam's original sin of disobedience to the genetically inherent sin nature which results in spiritual death. Because of these imputations, human life and spiritual death occur simultaneously.

God is fair in imputing Adam's original sin to the sin nature since they belong together, for it was Adam's original sin which produced the sin nature. God not only was perfectly just in this act, but wise in making all mankind sinners at birth, and gracious in providing a solution through the cross.

Jesus not only had to be born perfect, but He also had to be genetically related to King David in order to assume the title "Son of David" (Isaiah. 9:7; Luke 1:32; Matthew. 21:9). (Even though some theologians acknowledge that Jesus was the Son of David, they deny that God used the egg of Mary. One cannot be someone son unless there is a genetic connection through some parent.) The genetic connection came through the use of a woman's egg and since Mary was descended from David and Bathsheba through their youngest son, Nathan, she was qualified to be that mother. On the other hand, He could not have had a genetic father for if He had, he would have been born as we were born, with a sin nature.

When Jesus was born, God created a soul for him and placed it in his biological life resulting in human life. At the same time, the Son of God (the deity of Jesus Christ, possessing all the characteristics of God as the second person of the Trinity) united with the Son of David, the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ. This resulted in one person possessing two natures: the God-Man. His status as the unique God-Man meant that the Lord Jesus Christ became the mediator between righteous God and fallen man, qualified to provide the work of reconciliation for all mankind on the cross (1 Tim. 2:5; Rom. 5:11).

### *The Biblical Viewpoint of Life:*

Some translations of this passage state that Mary was pregnant “with child.” Matthew 1:18-25 contains no expression such as “pregnant with child.” Certain translators who do not believe that there is just biological life, but also soul life in the womb, added the phrase “pregnant with child” to the translation. The Greek text uses two phrases for pregnancy in this passage; one is found in verse eighteen and the other in this verse. In verse eighteen it states that Mary was discovered “εν γαστρι εχουσα / en gastri ekousa” which literally translated means “she was having in the womb.” There is no object mentioned at all. Since the Jews understood that there was no human life in the womb, they just described pregnancy as “having in the womb [a possession in the womb].” In this verse, Matthew describes pregnancy as “that which [that substance which] was conceived in her.” The Greek expression “that which was conceived” is a neuter participle with a neuter article. In other words, this Greek expression designates the fetus as neuter. The usage of the neuter would play down the importance of the fetus and would imply that the fetus has no human life since human life has to be either male or female. Also, in this passage in describing conception and the fetus, the word “child” is never used and for a good reason. There is no human life in the womb.

**1:21. She will give birth to a son and you [Joseph] will call His name Jesus for He will save [Jesus is a transliteration of the Hebrew name “Joshua Yehoshua” meaning “The Lord is (our) salvation”] His people [the Jews] from their sins [The cross: since this passage is discussing the Jews, it excludes the Gentiles]**

Notice the order here: first, birth; second, becoming a son; and third, giving a name. The Scripture never calls the fetus a child, a son or a daughter. Furthermore, in Scripture naming of the child always comes after birth for the simple reason that a fetus is not a human being. King Solomon writing under the ministry of the Holy Spirit states in Ecclesiastes 3:2a, “...a time to be born, and a time to die,” thus defining the boundaries of human life. At birth the soul is imputed to biological life; at death the soul departs from biological life. The Lord also emphasizes birth as the start of human life, “Jesus answered and said to him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3). In John 3:5, Jesus goes on to say, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born out from water and out from the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.”

In order to spend eternity with God one must undergo two births. If a mother aborts a two month old fetus, there is no birth; and if no birth, no soul; if no soul, no human life; if no human life, no potential for eternal life. The first birth occurs at physical birth when the placenta breaks and amniotic fluid flows out from a broken membrane (“born of water”) and the second birth occurs at salvation when one receives a human spirit from the Holy Spirit (“born of the Spirit”), and the Father then imputes eternal life to that newly created human spirit. If human life really did occur in the womb, Christ would have created the following metaphor, “one has to be conceived again,” but he didn’t.

*Identifying the Messiah:*

**1:22-23. Now this whole matter occurred in order that what was communicated by the Lord through the prophet [Isaiah] might be fulfilled saying, “Behold, the virgin shall become pregnant [literally in the Greek: “she will have in the womb”] and she shall give birth to a son and they [Jewish believers] shall call his name Immanuel” which is translated “God with us.”**

The Jews were given many ways of identifying the Messiah. Two ways pertinent to this passage are as follows: He would be in the royal line of David, and He would come into this world by means of a virgin pregnancy and birth. Although David and Bathsheba had four sons, only the lines of two sons survived. Joseph was in the line of Solomon, and Mary was in the line of Nathan. Thus, their marriage brought the two existing royal lines of David together. The Jews should have realized that this royal marriage could easily have been the marriage in which the humanity of Christ would be born.

*Isaiah prophesied that a virgin pregnancy would be a sign:*

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you all [the Jewish people] a miraculous sign: Behold, a virgin will be pregnant and will bear a son, and she [Mary will recognize that Jesus is the God-Man based on what Gabriel had told her in Luke 1:35, and so she will be the first to use the word Immanuel] will call His person ‘Immanuel’ [God is with us].” (Isaiah 7:14)

The primary meaning of the Hebrew word “עלמה / alma” is “virgin”; its secondary meaning is “young woman.” In this passage it is obvious that the author intended to use the primary meaning of this word, since it is not a miracle for a young woman to become pregnant. Furthermore, when Matthew translated this verse into the Greek, he used the Greek word “παρθενος / parthenos” which can only mean virgin.

Regarding the word Immanuel, ‘Im’ means ‘with’, ‘ma’ has no meaning and is added for euphony only, ‘nu’ means ‘us’ and ‘el’ means ‘God.’ In the age of Israel the deity of Christ dwelt between the cherubim in the Holy of Holies until the time when the Ark was destroyed (Exodus 25:21-22). In the Church Age, Jesus Christ dwells in the body of every believer (Colossians 1:27). However, during Christ’s thirty-three years on

the earth, he dwelt among the people, “And the Word [a title for the Son of God] became flesh and dwelt [tabernacle] among us” (John 1:14).

1:24. Joseph having awoken from the dream did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and he took alongside his wife [the marriage ceremony in the home of his wife].

Before the canon of Scripture was complete, God communicated his word through many unusual methods. In the Old Testament, The Son of God often communicated His message by appearing in different ways, which we call theophanies. ‘Theo’ means ‘God’; ‘phan’ means ‘appearance’. As a theophany, God the Son appeared as a man (Genesis 18:1-33); as a phenomena of nature (Exodus 3:2); and as the “Angel of Jehovah” (Genesis 16:7-13; Numbers 22:22-35). Before the Bible was written God also communicated through angels (Genesis 19:1-22; Luke 1:13-20; Acts 7:53); dreams (Genesis 37:5-10); visions (Daniel 2:19; Acts 16:9, 10), and trances (Acts 11:5-10). These methods were unusual but necessary because unlike now there was no completed canon of scripture.

*Conclusion:*

On the appointed day of the wedding ceremony, Joseph went to the home of Mary’s parents and participated in the wedding ceremony. It is not likely that there was a celebration since Mary was showing pregnancy.

**1:25. But, he did not know her [did not consummate the marriage] until after she had given birth to a son and then he [Joseph] called his name Jesus [Savior].**

Mary was a virgin when she conceived and remained so until after the birth of Jesus. God does everything in an orderly way. Because the uncontaminated biological life prepared for the humanity of Jesus was so important, and because it had to be crystal clear that Mary’s pregnancy did not involve her husband, Joseph did not have physical relations with his wife until after the birth of Jesus.

In conclusion of this passage, we should note that both the conception of Mary and the birth of Christ were unique, in order for God to provide for our salvation.

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