

January 6 Lesson

Today we read about the birth of Jesus. You remember that after the Annunciation, Mary left her hometown of Nazareth and went south to stay with her relative Elizabeth. She was there until the birth of John the Baptist, and then she returned to Nazareth. At this point, she was three months pregnant (Luke 1:31), and Matthew tells us that she was “betrothed” to a man named Joseph (Matt 1:18).

Now, Joseph’s name was mentioned in the genealogies of Jesus, but this is the first time we hear about him in the story. So who was Joseph? What do we know about him? Well, sadly, we know very little. Matthew tells us that he was a *tektōn* (Matt 13:55; deriv.: *architēktōn*), which is usually translated as “carpenter” but it can refer to any kind of craftsman working with wood, stone, or metal (cf. 1 Sam 13:19; 2 Sam 5:11; 1 Kings 7:14). Perhaps the best modern word would be “builder” or “craftsman.”

We’re not sure when Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but it seems likely the arrangement was made prior to the Annunciation. In those days, “betrothed” meant much more than “engagement” means today. Betrothal was a legally binding agreement to marry, signed by witnesses, and could be broken only by a writ of divorce. If the “husband” died, the betrothed woman was considered a widow. Yet the marriage was not consummated until the wedding night, when the bride ritually went from her parent’s home to her husband’s home. Jewish women were often betrothed as young as twelve to fourteen (arranged by the two sets of parents), with the wedding a year later. The husbands were usually about eighteen in order to be established financially.¹

Now, the text says that before Mary and Joseph consummated their marriage, Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:18). The phrase “was found” doesn’t imply that Mary tried to hide her pregnancy (i.e., she was “found out”), but rather that it became known to some, including Joseph. However, it wasn’t *public* knowledge, because Joseph was thinking about divorcing her privately (Matt 1:19).² So the question is, did Mary tell Joseph everything when she got back from Elizabeth’s? I personally think she did, but we can’t know for sure.

So, Joseph realizes Mary is pregnant, and if she does tell him everything, he either doesn’t believe her, or maybe, he doesn’t know what to believe. It would have been a crazy story to hear. What should he do? If he married her, it would be seen as an admission of guilt (everyone would think he was the father); if he divorced her, it would mean public shame and disgrace for her. What should he do?

Well, what does the Law say? In Deuteronomy 22:13–21, if a man accused his wife of not being a virgin at the time of their marriage and she was found guilty, she was to be stoned. In Deuteronomy 22:23–27, if a man had sex with a betrothed virgin in a city, both of them were to be stoned. The man died because he “violated his neighbor’s wife,” and the woman died because she was a willing participant (“she did not cry for help” with the point being that in a city in those days, she would have been heard and rescued). However, if a man had sex with a betrothed virgin in the country, only the man was to be stoned. The man died because he raped his neighbor’s wife, while the woman was innocent, since there was no one around to help her.

In Mary’s case, the only way she could avoid a death penalty was to claim that she had been raped in the country. But, of course, that wasn’t what happened, and her story was this incredible tale about an angel and God supernaturally causing her to conceive. Now by the first century, the Romans prohibited the Jews from carrying out death sentences (cf. John 18:31), and so in the case of immorality or adultery, divorce was the normal course. A “just” man like Joseph (Matt 1:19) would have been expected to bring a

¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 75.

² Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 74.

formal charge of adultery against Mary in a public trial. Yet Joseph was “unwilling to put her to shame” (Matt 1:19). Why? I think it tells you something about both Joseph and Mary—Joseph evidently loved Mary and was a kind and compassionate person, while Mary had clearly lived an honest and righteous life up to that point (cf. Luke 1:28–30). What could be done? There *was* an option that avoided a scandal and was still legally correct: a “private” annulment of the contract. Jewish law (the Mishnah) allowed for the divorce of a suspected adulteress before just two witnesses,³ and that’s what Joseph decided to do.

But as Joseph was considering these things, an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him, “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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:20–21). Now, Matthew and Luke have already mentioned Jesus’ name, but I want to pause here and look at its meaning. The Greek word for Jesus is *Iēsous*, and this reflects the Hebrew *Yeshua* (Joshua). The Hebrew word is a combination of *Ya*, an abbreviation for *Yahweh*, the personal name for God in the OT (Exod 3:14), and the verb *yasha*, meaning “deliver” or “save.” Thus, *Yeshua*, and correspondingly, Joshua and Jesus mean “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation.” Since Jesus came to save his people from their sins, this name is supremely appropriate!

Matthew goes on to say that this took place to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us)” (Matt 1:23; Isa 7:14). Now, this prophecy was originally given to King Ahaz during a time when the king of Israel and the king of Syria threatened the southern kingdom of Judah. Ahaz was very afraid, and God assured him through Isaiah that the kings he dreaded would soon be destroyed. But Ahaz didn’t believe Isaiah, and so God gave Ahaz this prophecy, introduced by the words, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive...” (Isa 7:14a). Later, Isaiah’s own child was connected with the downfall of Israel and Syria, so at least a partial fulfillment of this prophecy took place in Ahaz’s day (see Isa 8:3–4). However, the larger context of Isaiah indicates that there was someone greater in view: the promised “Immanuel” would bring a great light (Isa 9:2–3) and would be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). Thus, as Matthew says, the complete and more glorious fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy is found in the birth of Jesus the Messiah.⁴

So, Joseph took Mary as his wife, and she remained a virgin until she gave birth. Now, Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth, but the prophet Micah said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; cf. Matt 2:3–5). How was this going to work out? Well, God prompted Caesar Augustus (Caesar = “Emperor” and Augustus = “Majestic”) to order a census of the Roman Empire.

Caesar Augustus’ name was Gaius Octavius (historians refer to him as ‘Octavian’), and he was the grandnephew and later adopted son of Julius Caesar himself. After the murder of Julius Caesar, he was named chief heir and ruled in a triumvirate with Mark Antony and Lepidus. Lepidus fell from power in 36 BC and Antony’s involvement with Cleopatra of Egypt brought him into conflict with Octavian. In 31 BC Octavian won a decisive victory over Antony at Actium and was finally acknowledged as the sole Emperor by the Senate in 27 BC when they gave him the honored name Augustus.⁵ Octavian built the Roman Forum, founded libraries, built roads, sponsored lavish spectacles for the people, and boasted that he had found Rome “built in brick but left it in marble.”⁶ He restored unity and orderly government after a long period of destructive civil wars, and ushered in the Pax Romana, an era of peace and prosperity

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 51.

⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, 78–79. This is why the Greek translation of the OT (the LXX) chose to use the word “virgin” rather than simply “young girl” as in the Hebrew text—it wanted to emphasize the supernatural nature of the prophecy.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 202–203.

⁶ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2015), 68.

throughout the Greco-Roman world that lasted for two centuries.⁷ It was into this era of peace that Jesus was born.

So, back to the census, how did that work? Well, here in America, we have a census every ten years, and it's a population census which can be filled out from your home (you can do it on the internet now). No travel or taxation involved. And actually, the typical Roman census, although done for the purpose of taxation or military conscription, was similar. You didn't have to travel anywhere; you were registered in the place where you currently lived. However, there were times when people who *owned property* in another district had to be registered in that district.⁸ And, of course, in Israel, property was allotted by tribe, and returning to your tribal property was very important to the Jews (cf. Lev 25:10). So it may be that Joseph, who was from the tribe of Judah, owned property in Bethlehem, and thus he needed to travel there to be registered. Mary went with him, either because she was also required to be there for a poll tax, or maybe simply because the baby was due and she didn't want to be separated from Joseph for the birth.

Whatever the case, they traveled the 70 miles to Bethlehem (around a three day trip), and most likely ended up staying with relatives. Now, the ESV says, "There was no place for them in the inn," and so we're used to thinking that they were staying in some kind of hotel, but the Greek word is *kataluma*, which means "guest room" or "lodging place," and it's the same word used for the place where Jesus had his last Passover meal (cf. Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11). In those days, houses in Bethlehem were often built over a cave where animals were kept (the basement), and they usually had a small guest room for visitors, but with the census, the guest room was taken, and so it's likely that Mary and Joseph ended up down in the basement area where the animals were kept. Imagine—the King of kings was laid in a manger!

And who was told about this miraculous birth? Some shepherds! Who were these shepherds? Well, we don't know much about them, but they could have been young (remember David the youngest was out watching his father's sheep; 1 Sam 16:11). Also, there could have been girls (remember Rachel was a shepherdess; Gen 29:9; also Jethro's daughters were out with the sheep; Exod 2:16). Now, in the earlier history of Israel, shepherds were regarded with honor (after all, Abraham, Moses and David were all shepherds at some point), but in the time of Jesus, they were usually looked down on. After all, shepherds were often ritually unclean due to their contact with manure and blood and dead animals, so it's no surprise that they weren't considered high society.

And how were these shepherds told? Zechariah saw the angel Gabriel and was given a sign. Mary saw Gabriel and was told of Elizabeth's pregnancy. What about the shepherds? They got an angel (likely Gabriel again), the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were given the sign of a baby in a manger, and then a multitude of the heavenly army (host) praising God and saying, "Glory to God!" This is amazing! What began with a righteous priest in the Temple has now broadened to include shepherds out in the open fields. Clearly, this salvation is for all people everywhere!⁹

Now, I want to focus on something the angel told the shepherds: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). We have three key words here: Savior, Christ, and Lord. The word "Savior" has already been connected with God: Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," and Zechariah said, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he...has raised up a horn of salvation for us" (Luke 1:46–47, 68–69). The word "Christ" is Greek for "anointed," which in Hebrew is Messiah (remember Psalm 2 says the Messiah is the Son of God). The word "Lord" has already been connected with God by Mary and Zechariah, and it was also used in the

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Luke 1–5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 143.

⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 101.

⁹ KJV says, "On earth peace, good will toward men" while the ESV says, "On earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (Luke 2:14). The difference is based on a one letter difference in Greek manuscripts: εὐδοκίας vs. εὐδοκία. Earliest manuscripts favor the ESV, the majority favor KJV. Most scholars now prefer ESV.

Greek OT (LXX) as the standard word to refer to Yahweh. The point? The angel is telling the shepherds that the everlasting God, Yahweh, has just been born in Bethlehem! Don't miss this amazing statement, because Luke wants you to understand that Jesus (Yahweh saves) wasn't just another man—he was God come in flesh, Immanuel, God with us!