

Main Street UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 1:18-25 **“An Alternate Telling”**

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(4th Sunday of Advent)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

IA: MATTHEW 1:18-25 "AN ALTERNATIVE TELLING"

Discontinuity(Mary) Within Continuity(Joseph)

- N.D.** **1) vv.18-19 NARRATIVE: BETROTHED MARY AND JOSEPH NEARLY DIVORCED.**
- Question Of 1:16 = Is Joseph Jesus' Father? Does Genealogy Matter?
- 18 Now, as for **JESUS** the Christ (i.e. Messiah), *Messiah* 5x (1:1, 16-17[2x], 18, 2:4) Oddity Of 1:16, //1:1
his origin (Gk. *genesis*) took place this way: 1:1 Link (*geneos*), How Was Jesus Adopted Into Davidic Lineage?
Who & How, Stage 1: Promised To One Another By Families
- 5:27-30, 2 Models, NAME/ MARITAL STATE (Stage 2) (1)
- a When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph
- b but **BEFORE THEY CAME TOGETHER**, Jn. 7:41, No Mistake, Stage 3, HER CHARACTER (2)
- c she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. Not Joseph, Divine Sonship, PREDICAMENT (3)
She Has Info He Does Not! God Not Ask Joseph's Permission!
- 19 a And her husband **JOSEPH**, Assumes Adultery, Disappears @ 13:55, NAME/MARITAL STATE (1')
- b being a righteous (just) man, 5:20, Lk. 1:6, Deut. 22:13-19 (offered self), 23-24 (seduced), 25-27 (raped)
- DIVORCE? but unwilling to put her to shame, 9:13, 22:39-40, MERCY: HIS CHARACTER (2')
- c resolved to divorce her quietly (privately). *m. Sot.* 1, 5 PREDICAMENT RESOLVED (3')
- Less-Harsh Option, No Formal Inquiry, Inform Father, Lose Bride Price
- 2) vv.20-21 DIRECT DISCOURSE: ANGEL APPEARS TO JOSEPH: PSALM 130:8.**
- D.D.** Trinitarian Revelation By Angel/Dream, New Data, Joseph Never Speaks!
- 20 But as he considered this, Birth/Naming, Gen. 16:11-17, 17:15-22, I Chron. 22:9-10, I Kgs. 13:2, Is. 7:14-17
- REVELATION 1/4 Dreams To Joseph (2:12, 13, 19, 22), O.T. Dreamer Joseph, Gen. 39-41
- a) **behold**, There Is No Scandal For Joseph To Fear, BEHOLD(1)
- an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, 27:19, Ex. 3:1-2, ANGELOPHANY (2)
- "Joseph, *son of David*, 1:1, 6(2x), Like Solomon, PERSONAL ADDRESS, LINEAGE (3)
- Angel Explains Work Of Trinity: Spirit, Son, Lord, Non-sexual Generation
- b) do not fear to take Mary *your wife*, //Lk. 1:35, Fulfill Stage 3, COMMAND 1 (4a)
- for that which is **conceived** in her is of the Holy Spirit; v.18 God's Act, Is. 61:1, REASON 1 (4b)
- For Joseph To Name Gives Legal Status
- 21 c) and she will **bear a son**, Common Name = Clue To His Mission
- and *you* shall **call his name Jesus** ("Yahweh helps/ saves"), *Jeshua*, COMMAND 2 (5a)
- for 'he will save his people from their sins'" (Ps. 130:8). Heb. 4:15, REASON 2 (5b)
- Not Militaristic/National Salvation, //26:28
- D.D.** **2') vv.22-23 DIRECT DISCOURSE: ISAIAH 7:14 (LXX).** vv.22-23 Echoes vv.20-21
- God Speaks = Written Revelation In Scripture Confirms Plan
- 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet: Scriptural Assurance For Dream
- No Mean Isaiah Had This In Mind, 1/12 Formula Citations, Demonstrates Continuity
- 23 a) "**Behold**, *Virgin Will 1) Conceive and 2) Bear*
- Answers Question Of 21:45-46, David's Lord? David's Son?
- b) a virgin shall **conceive** Addressed To The House Of David, LXX Translates *Parthenos* = Virgin
- Is. 7:7-25, King Ahaz, Heb. *Alma* = Young Marriageable Women, Not *Betulah*
- c) and **bear a son**, Salvation Not From Human Potential: Grace
- and **his name shall be called Emmanuel**" ("God with us"). Is. 8:10, 9:6, Mt. 28:20
- Worshiped! Throne Name, More Than Jewish *Messiah*, *They Will Call...*
- N.D.** **1') vv.24-25 NARRATIVE: MARY AND JOSEPH COMPLETE MARRIAGE RITUAL.**
- REMARRIAGE Focus Not On Birth But Naming, Davidic Son Despite Virginal Conception
- 24 When **JOSEPH** awoke from sleep, Never Hear His Voice! Awoke With New Information In A New World!
- he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; OBEDIENCE TO REVELATION (6)
- 25 he took his wife, Obeys v.20b, Villages Assumes He Is Father, Bore The Shame
- but **KNEW HER NOT** *until** (*heos*) she had borne a son; Obeys v.23c, Gen. 4:1, Euphemism For Sex
- and he called his name **JESUS**. Focus = Legal Father, Obeys v.21b, Circumcised Day 8, 12:46-50, 13:55
- No Bethlehem Trip, Manger, Angels Rejoicing, Shepherds, Swaddling Clothes As Lk.
- Dual Paternity: Son of God/ David, Royalty From Mother's Husband
- Point = Son Of David In Spirit By Virginal Conception, Charge Of Illegitimacy Followed Jesus, Jn. 7:41, 8:39-41
- Legal Naming, *m. B. Bat.* 8:6, "If a man said, 'This is my son,' he may be believed."

*Roman Catholics and Protestants disagree on the adverb *until* in v. 24. Catholics read it through the lens of their doctrine to mean Mary is perpetually a virgin (before, during, after birth) and had no children after Jesus. Thus the *old Joseph* in some art and nativity sets (too old to be interested!) This is a non-biblical legend popularized in the late 2nd century through the non-canonical *Infancy Gospel Of James* (19:3). The implication of v. 24 and 13:55-56 (a list of siblings) is that Joseph sired children after Jesus (Irenaeus *Haer.*, 3.16.21-22). Virginity is a virtue before marriage, not after. One-flesh union is constitutive of marriage. Mary was both mother of Jesus and wife of Joseph, a model disciple and spouse. Faithfulness to both is possible.

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 1:18-25

In this thought unit Matthew answers a question raised by the genealogy (1:1-17): Why is Joseph not listed as Jesus’ father with the usual *begat*? And, Why is Joseph introduced as “the husband of Mary, *of whom was born* Jesus who is called Christ?” Because Joseph is not Jesus’ bio-dad since the origin of Mary’s virginal conception was not biological but theological, i.e by the Holy Spirit. Joseph officially adopted Jesus at his naming as the angel said it should be (v.21b). Joseph’s lineage now belongs to Jesus as part of his Messianic credentials. When you add up Jewish history as exemplified in Matthew’s genealogy, it all points to Jesus as its meaning; his descendants are his followers, not physical offspring.

The structure of the unit is a 4:2 concentric pattern (1-2-2'-1') or chiasm. Multiple inclusions mark the beginning and end of the thought unit: *Jesus* (v.18a) // *Jesus* (v.25b), *before they came together* (v.18b) // *knew her not* (v.25b), *Joseph* (v.19a) // *Joseph* (v.24a). The outside frames (1. vv.18-19 // 1' vv.24-25) are narrative discourse (N.D.) while the two central components (2. vv.20-21 // 2' vv.22-23) are direct discourse (D.D.) in which two speeches are given: 1) vv.20-21 = the angel of the Lord to Joseph, and 2) vv.22-23 = the words of the Is. 7:14 (LXX). Note that the angel’s speech conforms to the three-part outline of the Isaiah quote: a) *behold*, b) *conceive*, c) *bear and name*. The six parts of the angelophany of vv.20-21, 24 (Behold, angelic appearance, personal address, command 1/reason 1, command 2/reason 2, obedience) are shaped to match the form of the Isaiah quote. Thus, special revelation in an angel confirms and fulfills scriptural revelation in the prophet. There is continuity in God’s new work for his people.

Matthew’s opening in v. 18 is formal and echoes 1:1 of the genealogy, “Now as for Jesus the Messiah, his origin (Gk. *genesis*) took place this way.” Next is the introduction of Jesus’ parents. Their treatments are parallel in three parts: a) name and marital state, b) character analysis, c) statement of predicament. Mary is between stages two and three of marriage, has not had sex with Joseph, and is pregnant. Joseph her husband is righteous and has made the merciful decision not to shame her publicly but divorce privately, thus forfeiting the bride price. The situation is intolerable. What will they do?

Like his Old Testament namesake, Joseph receives divine revelation in dreams, five of them (1:20, 2:12, 13, 19, 22). An angelophany (vv.20-21, 24) in six parts announces a providential birth based on Old Testament models (e.g. Gen. 16:11-17, 17:15-22). Joseph is addressed in terms of his ancestry as *son of David* and commanded not to fear the scandal of marriage to Mary, the reason being that the child is the creative act of God through the Holy Spirit, understood as a non-sexual betting in contrast to Greco-Roman mythologies of the coupling of a male deity and a human female. The child is male; Joseph is to name him a common name with a theological meaning echoed in Psalm 130:8, “for he will save his people from their sins,” both the penalty of sin and its power. Jesus is not nationalistic in the partisan sense.

The next section (2' vv.22-23) confirms the angelic revelation is grounded in holy writ and thus demonstrative of consistent divine purpose. What Isaiah promised long ago, that besieged King Ahaz of Judah would see a child born to a marriageable young woman (Heb. *almah*) as a sign God was with them and would prevail over Israel and Syria, is brought to full reach in a more-miraculous birth to the virginal Mary, a child who is not symbolically but literally *God with us*. The Joseph whose voice is never heard is immediately obedient after waking (1' vv.24-25). Because Isaiah stated the virgin would *conceive and bear*, there are no marital relations till after the birth. Jesus was adopted and named at his circumcision.

AN ALTERNATE TELLING

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife....”

Angelic divorce prevention.

M A T T H E W 1 : 2 0

I’ve never met Dr. John Lennox, professor of mathematics at Oxford and a noted Christian apologist,¹ but I’ve watched several of his debates with prominent atheists on YouTube. In a recent book Lennox tells of touring Eastern Europe and meeting a Jewish woman from South Africa who was researching relatives who died in the Holocaust. On their guided tour, they passed a display that bore the words “Arbeit macht frei,” German for the phrase "work makes free." It was a mock-up of the main gate of Auschwitz. The display included photos of the horrific medical experiments carried out on children by Dr. Josef Mengele. At that point she turned to Lennox, "And what does your religion make of this?" He writes:

“What was I to say? She’d lost her parents and many relatives.... Nothing in my life remotely paralleled the horror her family endured. Still she stood in the doorway waiting for an answer. I eventually said, "I would not insult your memory of your parents by offering simplistic answers.... What is more, I have young children, and I cannot bear to think how I might react if anything were to happen to them, even if it were far short of the evil Mengele did. I have no easy answers; but I do have what, for me at least, is a *doorway into an answer.*"

"What is it?" she said.

I said, "You know I am a Christian. That means I believe Yeshua is the Messiah. I also believe he was God incarnate, come into our

¹ An *apologist* gives evidence and arguments for Christian faith; the theological discipline is *apologetics*, from the Greek *apologia* which means to put forward a reasoned defense, not to say *I'm sorry!* as in the common sense meaning of *apology*. See John Lennox, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford, England: Lion, 2009); *Miracles: Is Belief In The Supernatural Irrational?* (The Veritas Forum, 2013).

world as Savior, which is what his name 'Yeshua' means. Now I know that this is even more difficult for you to accept. Nevertheless, just think about this question: if Yeshua was really God, as I believe he was, what was God doing on a cross?

"Could it be that God begins just here to meet our heartbreaks, by demonstrating he did not remain distant from our human suffering, but became part of it himself? For me, this is the beginning of hope; and it is a living hope that cannot be smashed by the enemy of death. The story does not end in the darkness of the cross. Yeshua conquered death. He rose from the dead; and one day, as the final judge, he will assess everything in absolute fairness, righteousness, and mercy."

There was silence. She was still standing, arms outstretched, forming a motionless cross in the doorway. After a moment, with tears in her eyes, very quietly but audibly, she said: "Why has no one ever told me that about my Messiah before?"²

That's about as dramatic and politically non-correct as it gets, what I've come to call *a divine appointment* in which a key is produced and a locked life swings open on the hinges of divine providence. What a tough question, "Why has no one ever told me that about my Messiah before?" to which there are several answers, the clearest being that the church of the last seventy years is so intimidated by the horrors of the Holocaust that we are uncertain about the credibility of our witness to Jews, and secondly- and even more difficult- is that we have grown uncertain about who Jesus is and why he matters. Nice guy, great Mom, astounding teacher, courageous in suffering, founder of a world religion, but God the Son assuming flesh in the womb of his Virgin Mother, one person with two natures living a perfect life of truth and miracles, then rising bodily from the dead and returning to appear multiple times after a brutal Roman execution with implications for where God is revealed? You've got to be kidding! Just a bunch of myths. Don't you know that all the great religions are just differing roads to the top of the same mountain? Tolerance is in; exclusive claims are out! No truth anymore, just preference and perspective. In the face of tough questions from a skeptical world we've lost our intellectual nerve, which is why apologists like Lennox are so valuable. If an Oxford mathematician defends the credibility of Christian faith at the highest levels and is also able to give a sensitive witness in the face of the Holocaust, maybe we should listen.

² Edited from *Gunning for God* (London, England: Lion, 2011), 141-142.

Now I trust Lennox’s telling of this story because I’ve listened to perhaps ten hours of his debates and find him trustworthy. When a prepared witness is surprised by an unexpected opportunity, there the Holy Spirit is active on both sides of a relationship. Notice his humility and sensitivity to the woman’s history and pain; also the simplicity of his witness. He focuses on the basic outline of the Jesus story, the same story line found in the great creeds³ and in our own doctrinal statements, that in this life- as no other- God has come near in order to change life and give hope. In Jesus God became flesh and conquered death so that a new relationship with God is now offered to all, starting with God’s historic people. As Paul said in Romans, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, *to the Jew first*, and also to the Greek.”⁴

A national poll by the Barna organization asked, "If you could ask God only one question and get an answer, what would you ask?" The common response was, "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?" John Stott admitted the same, "The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith.... Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God's justice and love." Richard Swinburne says the problem of evil is "the most powerful objection to traditional theism," meaning belief in a moral and loving God.⁵

And here I like where Lennox began, with an opening line full of the Spirit’s gentle wisdom, “I have no easy answers,” he said, “but I do have what, for me at least, *is a doorway into an answer.*” He then followed with a restatement of the Jesus story centered around two key doctrines or teachings; first, that God has fully identified with the pain of human life in taking on our flesh- *the incarnation*; and secondly, that having died a horrible death equal to the worst of any of her relatives, Jesus rose victorious in a bodily resurrection to give hope to all who remain in this world with its suffering and unanswered questions. This Jesus did as a faithful Jew, one of her own people. Lennox’s witness was brief, conversational, and fitted to the occasion; it stirred in her a deep emotional and intellectual response, "Why has no one ever told

³ For a fresh and accessible reading, see Justin S. Holcomb, *Know The Creeds And Councils* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014)

⁴ 1:16.

⁵ From Randy Alcorn, *If God is Good* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Books, 2009),15

me that about *my* Messiah before?" with emphasis on the little word *my*: *my Messiah*. We listen to people; we honor their aspirations and losses and questions and ethnic history, and then- hopefully under the Spirit's inspiration- select those parts of the Jesus story that engage their questions, then wait and see what connects. And because you never know about *divine appointments* much ahead of time, you must, as St. Peter counseled, "*Always be prepared* to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you..."⁶

This is the best of Christian witness, faithfully doing life and looking for openings, chances for face-to-face storytelling and issuing invitations, as if to say in a hundred ways, "Have you considered Jesus and his people, who he is and what he left behind?" Not canned programs but vulnerable witness over the fence, in joys and sorrows, in the aisle of a grocery store, at a ball game, at a hunt club or book club, even at work and in civic pursuits. Not a canned presentation from a talking head but a customized word. You don't have to be an Oxford professor or trained pastor with a big library to do it. Just tell them what you know and be comfortable answering questions with "I don't know, but let's find out together." Honesty is disarming; treat them like an honest seeker; let the big questions drive you to study and reflection.⁷

It was not easy to find language to describe Jesus, but in Matthew we have a good start. He has a unique origin: he is *of the Holy Spirit* and *of the Virgin Mary*, in him the human and divine natures are joined. His mission is large: *to save his people from their sins*. He deals with the impediments between us and God. He has credentials as the fulfiller of Scripture, as when Matthew says: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by Isaiah." He is the one of whom angels speak. He has an ordinary name with special meaning, *Joshua* or *Jesus*- which means *Yahweh saves*. In him we meet *Emmanuel*, God with us.⁸

⁶ 1 Peter 3:15b.

⁷ Good places to begin are J.P. Moreland & Klaus Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2008); Rice Broocks, *God's Not Dead: Evidence For God In An Age Of Uncertainty* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2013); Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Carol Stream, ILL: Tyndale, 2010).

⁸ For ancient pagan parallels to Matthew 1:18-25 and their function for the original hearers, see Charles Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), "Miraculous Conceptions and Births," 40-48; for a defense of an historical virginal conception, see Ben Witherington, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 51-53.

It took the church three centuries of reflection to come to the precise definitions of the Nicene Creed, but the raw assertions are here in Matthew.⁹ Jesus the male is *through* a woman, but not *from* a man. He brings Scripture to its goal. In him God is with us as Son and agent to *defeat* the ancient curse of death and *cure* the systemic disease of sin and *break* the bondage of evil and *banish* ignorance of God's intent so as to *heal* our relationship with God and one another. In Jesus we are embraced and given a future within the force field of God's holy love which will- when the kingdom comes- be our new reality. Jesus comes to enable a new friendship of following him through life towards the kingdom of God, not so we may become angels but so we can become fully human again as male and female, bearing the divine image without distortion because of what he has done for us and in us and through us.

In his lectures Bishop N.T. Wright often uses the image of a mirror set to the sun at 45 degrees so we reflect the world back to God in praise and prayer while at the same time reflecting God's light into the world.¹⁰ It's what living icons and image-bearers are designed to do. Facing only up to God the mirror misses the world; facing only out it ignores God, but at 45 degrees it reflects both at once. That is our dual vocation and the deep meaning of being human: love God, love God's world, let the traffic go always in both directions. Our mirror is now cracked, is now distorted and dirty and not properly aligned, but in Jesus it's being restored to full function, now in part, later in perfection. I am under extensive repair and going through massive realignment. The discomfort that attends the process is proof I have a future. I am not being scrapped; I am being remade and refitted for life in God's kingdom.

Jesus is not from human initiative. We didn't make him up; he's not our idea. If the church is right on the big issues, he's God's with meat at ground level, and it's a big surprise, even if hints are found in the Old Testament and more dimly in some pagan myths and the hopes they embody for a union of heaven and earth. Joseph and Mary participate, even cooperate with the Almighty, but in the strictest sense they do not create Jesus. His source is God, his parents *Mary* and *Joseph*, though at different levels of engagement: Mary is his creative matrix, Joseph his legal path into the

⁹ See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004).

¹⁰ For a sampling, go to <http://ntwrightpage.com>, or the YouTube channel *All Things N.T. Wright*. Listening to these is a feast for heart and mind.

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Messianic lineage of David through naming and adoption.¹¹ Salvation is not human potential writ large. Jesus did not evolve up and out of us at ground level. He is God's gift, deity wrapped in humanity and laid in the common manger of our broken world, a present to us all. To the question, *What* did he do and *how* did he do it? the church has a clear answer, "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary *and became truly human.*"¹²

There are two independent tellings of Jesus' virginal conception, one in Luke from Mary's perspective which we covered last week,¹³ one in Matthew from Joseph's viewpoint that's before us today. And while it is impossible to coordinate the two tellings in a strict historical fashion, there are at least seventeen common points of contact,¹⁴ and since Matthew and Luke did not know each others work in the early 80's of the first century, the material they share points back behind both to an earlier oral or written source, so to say that stories of Jesus' conception are late or legendary or mythic additions cannot be sustained. Matthew and Luke, through independent channels, are interpreting what they received about Jesus' singular conception, and the fact that the Creeds later feature it prominently reminds us how important it is to the church's vision of what God is up to. Neither history nor science deals well with one-off events, with happenings without precedent, and at either end of Jesus' life we have such singularities in a virginal womb and an empty tomb with God the Son coming through and out of both. But if Jesus is God the Son enfleshed, why should be surprised at unusual events? How else is God going to enter our world, hide out for three decades, get our attention by going public for three years, preview the kingdom, do his painful work, then make an exit in resurrection after showing that the worst we can do is insufficient to stop God's purposes? Perhaps there was another way to enable a true incarnation, but this is the one God chose, so deal with it, or else make up your own religion and take your chances.¹⁵ As for me,

¹¹ For a summary of classic teaching on the incarnation, see Thomas Oden, *The Word of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), 93-196.

¹² *The Nicene Creed* in *The U.M. Hymnal*: 880.

¹³ 1:26-38.

¹⁴ See the chart and graphic on page 16 of this sermon.

¹⁵ The Koran holds Mary in high honor, affirms a virginal conception of the prophet Jesus, but does not affirm that this act enables a true incarnation of deity because

I have no problem with a virginal one-off conception. It doesn't diminish or demean normal processes, just bypasses it for a special purpose. And since I do not live in a closed cause-and-effect universe but in a creation that remains open to its Creator, miracles are not an offense to me.¹⁶ The question for me is not if they happen, but why they seem to be so few and unpredictable. They weren't ignorant of where babies came from, only this one was different. His momma said so, and Mary was apparently around long enough after the events to act as a control on unnecessary exaggerations. As long as witnesses are around who preserve the testimony of participants, say Mary of the birth and Mary Magdalene of the resurrection, there's a limit to legendary developments.¹⁷ Quality control is present, and members of Jesus' family were around till near the end of the century.¹⁸

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Predicament of a Young Couple (1:18-19)

The genealogy which opens Matthew leaves us with a question. At the end of nineteen hundred years of fathers having sons starting with Abraham, the pattern changes, "...and Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, *of whom* Jesus was born, who is called Christ."¹⁹ No *begat* for Joseph to Jesus, and a curious *of whom* for Mary. The shift is from active to passive voice, from something someone did to something that happened to them. Is Joseph the father or not? Matthew whets our curiosity, then gives us an explanatory footnote in verses 18 through 25, "Now, as for Jesus Christ, *his origin* took place this way...." Matthew gives a description of Mary,

of their strict monotheism and rejection of the Trinity as polytheism (See Christopher Longhurst, "What 'Mary' Means To Muslims," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 47:1, Winter 2012, 115-118).

¹⁶ The standard treatment of *an involved God* is now Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility Of The N.T. Accounts, Volumes 1 and 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.)

¹⁷ On the role of eyewitnesses in the formation of the gospel traditions, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

¹⁸ Richard Bauckham, "The Relatives of Jesus," www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_relatives_bauckham.

¹⁹ 1:16.

then of Joseph in three parts: 1) a name, 2) a word about their character, and finally 3) their predicament. Marriage in those days was complicated. Jewish parents agreed to a marriage.²⁰ Stage one. Later on there was the betrothal which took place in the home of the bride's father; it was the time and place to haggle over the marriage contract and the bride-price which her family kept as security in case of divorce. At that point a couple became legally husband and wife; to break a marriage after betrothal required divorce. A young woman might remain in her father's house for a year before the wedding and consummation of the relationship. Marriage was too important to rush into. A Jewish girl between her betrothal and wedding might end up being a *virginal widow* if her husband died in the interim.²¹

Matthew is precise. Mary and Joseph are between stages two and three: post-betrothal, pre-marriage. Legal but not yet intimate, verse 18, "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, *but before they came together....*" God's timing is strategic. The structure of a legal marriage is in place but Mary still innocent. If there's a child on the way and Joseph's knows it's not his, there's only one other option: another man. The results are noted in an understated manner, "...she *was found* to be with child of the Holy Spirit." God is involved, but not as a substitute male. Mary is a virgin before, during, and after conception, but not during or after the birth, and on this second point we differ with Roman Catholic teaching.

Being chosen does not protect your reputation. There are circumstances only God can get you into, and only God can get you out of. Mary's image is in tatters, but she's about to learn God is trustworthy. The God who worked with her will also work in Joseph; together they will provide a home and heritage for Jesus. No one will understand. The shadow of illegitimacy stuck with Jesus²² to the point that it later developed in the second century into a claim Mary was raped by a Roman soldier.²³

²⁰ On ancient Jewish wedding customs, see Craig Keener, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 88ff.

²¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991, 36-37.

²² John 8:41.

²³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 67a. See Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi: An Intimate Biography* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 5-9. Chilton assumes Joseph is the true father and the virginal conception a theological myth to explain Jesus' influence.

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A parallel account of Joseph is given in verse 19. He is called *her husband* because of the betrothal. But his convictions are what interest me. Joseph is a *righteous man*, committed to obeying God’s Word, and the law says a woman who cheats after betrothal is adulterous. Based on available evidence, Joseph makes a decision. No public trial, no added humiliation; divorce her quietly. By doing so he forfeits the bride price.²⁴ It stays with her family. It costs him dearly; he and his family saved long for this marriage. No vengeance, just sadness and disappointment that their future has been foreclosed by her behavior.

What kind of man is Joseph? One who obeys God’s written will in Scripture and blends it with mercy. Joseph is moral but not rigid. He is tough *and* tender. He is two things men desperately need in our day: obedient to God and considerate of others. God has intruded; pain is all around; Mary is slandered; Joseph is acting rightly on insufficient evidence; parents are disappointed; Nazareth is full of gossip, and there is *no way* out unless God opens up a *new way* forward

New Evidence Through Personal Revelation (1:20-21).

“But as he considered this...” Joseph was not only a just and kind man but patient. A decision has been made, but the turmoil is still with him. He decides to sleep on the matter. Joseph’s virtues are beginning to pile up. I like this young man. Our friend Joseph is open to vivid religious experience as the invisible world intrudes into this one. But so is Mary, having had a creative encounter with the Spirit. This couple is bound by something deeper than affection or the marriage traditions of their community. Their marriage is called into cooperation with the Holy Trinity. The angel of the Lord cues Joseph that the child in Mary’s womb is there by the Holy Spirit and that he is not to fear but take Mary and formally adopt the newborn into his family, thus making him *a son of David*. Providence has found two willing co-conspirators, and through them the world will be changed.

Notice that God did not speak to Mary and Joseph at the same time; there was an awkward interim. For Mary it was an encounter with the Spirit of God, for Joseph an angel seen and heard in a dream. This is why we must be patient with and

When reading Chilton, Borg, and Crossan I welcome their scholarship, not necessarily their world view or theology!

²⁴ David Garland, *Matthew* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1994), 22.

respectful of other people’s spiritual paths; they are as different as fingerprints and as richly complimentary as our genders.²⁵ Joseph was about to throw Mary away precisely because she claimed a meeting with God that didn’t make sense. Only God could fix Joseph. And he did! “Mary, the divorce is off. Last night while I was sleeping.... I almost threw you away. God help us both!”

Joseph went to sleep with one vision of his future and woke with another. Theorists call this *a paradigm shift*.²⁶ Same life, same problems, radical new understanding. A divorce is stopped because God broke through. Fear is gone, trust reestablished, the future reinvented, and there is before them the awesome promise that in Jesus God is going to deal once for all with the problem that holds us in cruel captivity. *Jesus* was a common name, like Sam or Mark, *Jeshua* in Greek, *Joshua* in Hebrew. It’s popular meaning was *Yahweh saves*. And the ultimate issue is our inborn, inbred alienation from God. God heals the breach between Mary and Joseph, and in Jesus God heals the breach between the world and himself.

I like Joseph. I could use some of his deep virtues. Village guy, a craftsman, looking forward to the delights of marriage. A righteous man who obeyed Torah. A compassionate man who cared more for the feelings of others than his own financial welfare. A patient man who avoids snap decisions. A man open to mystical experiences which illumine Scripture. A man willing to raise a child not his own and marry a woman under a cloud. A man who obeys God despite the misunderstanding it brings. In a world where most of the images of masculinity are violent and selfish and lacking character, Joseph offers us a new starting point. His strength is deeper than macho, and his marriage is a partnership with God. The fiery rivers of male sexuality are under the moral restraint of self-control. Jesus benefitted from growing up with these two parents; they also benefitted since they were sinners in need of the salvation their Son came to offer. Divine wisdom is everywhere on display.

The Isaiah Text (1:22-23)

With the Isaiah citation of verses 22 and 23 we have a number of safeguards in place.

²⁵ For a helpful treatment of six possible paths, see Mark Mittelberg, *Confident Faith* (Carol Stream, ILL: Tyndale, 2013).

²⁶ Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 317-319.

Matthew 1:18-25 14

How do you know if it's God who spoke to you in a dream? This angel spoke about God, about the Holy Spirit, about sin and the saving work of Jesus Christ. An angel who teaches that God is other than Trinity and that sin is not an issue is not from God. Mormon angels and Christian angels teach different doctrine.

Note that the last phrase of the angel is a quote from Psalm 130, verse 8: "...he will save his people *from their sins*." An angel who says they've come to reveal your hidden divinity is not from above, so tell it to go back to the devil where it came from. People have spiritual encounters all the time; not all of them are from God.

Note also that not only the content but the form of the three-part angelic communicate is based on Isaiah 7:14. Faithful angels speak Scripture. Now I readily admit that in its original context this verse from Isaiah had nothing to do with a virginal conception. It was a promise to a besieged Hebrew king that before a young pregnant woman in his court weaned her child, a major foreign threat would be removed.²⁷ The child was to be given a symbolic name, *Emmanuel*, a reminder of God's presence. We have no evidence before Matthew that Jews saw this text as a predictor of a virginal conception of the Messiah.²⁸ But, after the fact, meaning later on after the resurrection of Jesus and the total review of Scripture it called for, Matthew saw a fulfillment not earlier apparent. What was obscure is brought to light because Jesus is not just a sign that God is with us; he *is* God with us, Emmanuel.

Obedience and Restraint (1:24-25)

So Joe the carpenter marries a high school honey with *a baby bump*. There's a celebration under the wedding canopy with blessings, and Joe took Miriam to his home but not to his bed- at least not yet. This is the intent of verse 24, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, *but knew her not until she had borne a son....*" Being caught in God's purposes requires a self-denial not asked of others. The text from Isaiah said a virgin would

²⁷ M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew: The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1996), 135.

²⁸ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004), 7, "... there is no evidence that anyone before Matthew saw that verse as something that would have to be fulfilled by the coming Messiah. It looks rather as though he found the verse *because he already knew the story*, not the other way around." My italics.

conceive *and deliver*. Mary's virginity was ended by birth, not by Joseph. What an extraordinary young man is Jesus' adopted *Abba Joe*. The question is, Are our churches and families producing this quality of young men and women?

CONCLUSION

There is an ancient folk tale from India of six blind men and an elephant. One feels the trunk and says in fear, "It is a snake." Another the tail, "No need to fear, it's only a rope." A third says it's a wall because he touches the belly, the fourth a pillar because his hand is on the leg, the fifth a spear because a tusk is touched, and the last a fan because the ear is large and flat. Each insists he is right; much quarreling ensues.

In the eyes of the teller, the elephant is God. The blind men are Christians and Muslims, Jews and others who mistake their perspective for the reality itself. God is beyond imagining; we are forever groping in the dark; how foolish to say your religion is truer than others. "So," concludes the Hindu Ramakrishna, "one can realize God through all religions." Or, to use another analogy, "All roads lead to the top of the same mountain, so take your pick or make up your own. Be enlightened!"

There are at least two problems with this classic tale of tolerance. It's told from the vantage point of one who sees the whole elephant, in this case a sage who is *above it all* and has already decided no one religion offers more truth than another, which is itself a truth claim that is not examined. If all are blind and partial, why not the teller as well? An assumption has been smuggled in without notice!

A second flaw is more serious. The story is a perfectly good description of human inability to know God by our own devices. But the story never considers a world-shattering question: What if the elephant talks? What if he tells the blind men: "That wall is my side. The fan is my ear. That's not a rope; it's a tail." If the elephant speaks, would the blind men be considered humble for ignoring his word? God is not silent, and God is not incompetent. God is self-revealed in Jesus Christ as nowhere else and preserved for us in four biographies. Because he is alive we do business with him now. We don't have to act like blind men with a mute elephant. What we have to do is walk humbly and courageously together in the truth we are given.²⁹

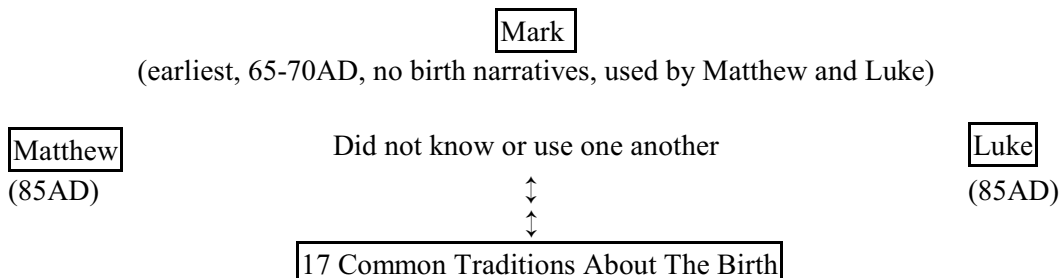
²⁹ Adapted from Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Religions That Rule The World - And Why Their Differences Matter* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2010), 338-389; critiques from K. DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word* (Crossway, 2014), 68-69.

A List Of Seventeen Traditions Common to Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2

(Since Luke and Matthew are independent, the traditions they share indicate an earlier tradition common to both.)

Common Traditions In Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2 Point To An Earlier Historical Core Used By Both Writers	Matthew	Luke
1. Jesus had two human parents: Mary and Joseph	1:18	1:27
2. Mary and Joseph were engaged -but not married- when Mary became pregnant.	1:18	1:27, 34
3. Joseph was a descendant of King David of Israel	1:16, 20	1:27, 32, 2:4
4. Mary conceived and became pregnant while she was still a virgin	1:18	1:27, 34
5. The Holy Spirit of God caused Mary’s conception, not the intercourse of Joseph and Mary	1:18, 20, 23, 25	1:34-35
6. The news of Mary’s pregnancy was initially unexpected and troublesome.	To Joseph	To Mary
7. Mary and Joseph remained together in spite of her premarital pregnancy, where marriage is not mentioned but surely implied.	1:24, 25	2
8. An angel visits Jesus’ parents to announce the birth.	1:20-23	1:30-35
9. An angel gives the baby a name- Jesus.	1:21	2:11
10. Through angels Jesus is defined as <i>Savior</i> .	2:21	2:11
11. Jesus was born while Herod the Great was king of Judea.	2:1	1:5
12. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.	2:1	2:4-6
13. Jesus will be king of the Jews. Jesus is Messiah	2:2, 4	1:32-33, 2:11
14. Jesus birth is understood in light of Jewish prophecies	Multiple	Multiple
15. Birth happens after Mary and Joseph have come to live together	1:24-25	2:5-6
16. Unexpected visitors are supernaturally summoned to visit Jesus.	Magi	Shepherds
17. Jesus, through born in Bethlehem, was raised in Nazareth.	2:23	2:39

Chart adapted from material in Mark D. Roberts, *The Birth of Jesus: Hype or History*, www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/jesusbirth); Charles Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 29.



Indicates That Both Matthew And Luke Drew On An Earlier Common Tradition About The Birth

“Because these infancy narratives are independent, the points they do overlap do provide independent attestation for pre-Synoptic tradition” (Craig Keener, *Matthew* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 83).