

Matthew 1:18-25

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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Verse 1:18 - "engaged" is misleading. Mary and Joseph have been betrothed - that is, solemnly contracted by their families to be married at some later date.

- "she was found to be with child" is a curious use of the passive voice. Who has done the finding? The text gives no indication. The fact that Mary is pregnant before she and Joseph have married is shameful in the extreme - both for Mary and her family. That the child is "from the Holy Spirit" confuses the situation since that is a great honour. In hindsight, it is the honour that has won the day. However, at the time, and in the actual circumstance, it is Mary's shame that guides Joseph's initial response.

(Aside. It is somewhat curious that it is Joseph who is acting here and not his family. Normally, marriages are pre-arranged by the parents. And so, it would normally be the families that would end a betrothal. For whatever reasons, the duty to act has fallen to Joseph alone.)

Verse 1:19 - This verse gives us a glimpse into the character of Joseph. Joseph is both righteous and merciful. His righteousness is shown in that he gives up his right to marriage with Mary in order that the father of the child might claim it as his own by marrying her. His mercy is shown in that he intends to do this "quietly," that is, with as little public gossip as possible.

Verse 1:20 - "an angel of the Lord." Note that in Matthew's telling of the birth, humans learn of God's plans from angel messengers, comets (the rising star), and from the scriptures. However,

When the public activity of Jesus begins ..., he becomes the source of information about what God wants of people.

Bruce Malina, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, page 26

- "conceived in her" is misleading. We now know that babies are "conceived" by the fertilization of an egg from the woman with sperm from the man. However, at the time of Mary (and up until quite recently), it was understood that women played no role in conception. The male - in this case the Holy Spirit - placed a human seed into the woman. And even this image is misleading since it was believed that the "seed" was actually a very small version of the later child - there was no understanding of fetal development within the womb. It is an anachronism to imagine that Jesus is half-human (from Mary's egg) and half-divine (from the Holy Spirit's sperm).

Verse 1:23 - Is a reference to Isaiah 7:14

Verse 1:24 - Joseph is also faithful in that when he awakes, he does what the angel of the Lord had commanded him. It should not be taken for granted that everyone always did what God commanded. (Consider how much the Ten Commandments are followed, even by professing Christians.)

A few things to note:

1. Matthew tells the story of the birth from Joseph's perspective; Luke from Mary's.
2. Mathew makes no mention of Nazareth until the family returns from exile in Egypt. (Verse 2:23) Thus, Matthew also makes no mention of traveling to Bethlehem. Without Luke's story, we would probably understand that Joseph and Mary lived in Bethlehem and that Jesus was born in their home there.
3. And so, Matthew makes no mention of an "inn" or a manger. The emphasis is on "no marital relations."

4. In this brief passage, we see how Joseph is required to step outside of his comfort zone. To move from being righteous and honourable in his own right, to embracing Mary with her child and all the potential for shame and dishonour that would bring.