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## THE BETROTHAL AND MARRIAGE OF MARY TO JOSEPH: A BIBLICAL MEDITATION

Christian theological investigations into the mystery of the Incarnation have tended to neglect the real possibility that the betrothal of Mary to Joseph may have been viewed by themselves at the time as a perfectly normal arrangement, and that when they entered upon it they had been looking forward, like all good Jews, with righteous desire to the time when God would give them the children they longed for, in order to fulfil His command to the descendants of Abraham to increase and multiply. Whilst many theologians have argued in the past that they must both have taken a special vow of celibacy before their betrothal in preparation, though unwittingly, for the Incarnation of the Son of God, I propose, on the contrary, that as they must have been entirely unaware of what was to come the sole unique thing about their betrothal - and subsequent celibate union - was that it was in Almighty God's plan to reward their supreme virtue and obedience to the Law with a Child beyond their human power to produce, and in truth beyond all their dreams. To substantiate this thesis, it will be necessary to review the ordering of God's plan as we find it described in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Now in Matthew we read that the Coming-to-be of Jesus Christ was in this way:

„While his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1,18).

This sentence needs not a little expounding if we are rightly to understand the reality of their marriage.

Betrothal among the Jews was, and is, a solemn affair. It denoted the satisfactory completion of negotiations between two families and assumed the consent of the young couple concerned to the financial and economic arrangements for marriage made for them and on their behalf by their respective parents. Once agreed, their legal relationship to each other became in principle that of a married couple with all the consequences entailed, save that they were not yet living under the same roof and would not be doing so until some twelve months later the husband completed the marriage by leading the bride ceremonially to his own home, in order to consummate it after a festive banquet. Furthermore, as Jesus Himself was to note, though divorce had been reluctantly permitted by Moses, every pious Jewish family regarded the bond established between the spouses as unbreakable and lifelong; for they knew that the Lord God had declared in the Prophecy of Malachi: „I hate divorce” (Ml 2,16). Hence when young Tobias got married to Sarah, he said on their wedding night: „Grant that I may find mercy and grow old with her”. And she said: „Amen” (Tob 8,7). Mary and Joseph would also have known that

Tobias had then added: „O God of our Fathers, you made Adam and gave him Eve as his wife, as a helper and support. From them the race of mankind has sprung”(Tob 8,6). Hence they both understood that the purpose of marriage is to give lifelong companionship to a man and his wife as the preparation for the reception of the children they expect God to give them; and furthermore they knew that they themselves were no exception to this rule.

Since we know from hindsight that Mary and Joseph were given a unique task in respectively conceiving and fostering the Divine Son of God, and since it is the common teaching of the Church that God invariably gives all the gifts and graces necessary for everyone to fulfil their vocation, it is certain that each of them had been likewise appropriately endowed by Him to fulfil perfectly their part in the upbringing of Jesus. And as it has normally been the privilege of the man to seek out the woman with whom he wishes to set up his life partnership, so we may confidently assume that Joseph in early manhood, when his parents judged that it was time for him to get married, was guided by Divine Providence to hear about the qualities of Mary, the virgin daughter of Joachim and Anne, and to ask for her hand in marriage.

Because they had been destined to educate the Saviour of mankind, we can be sure that it had been the Divine Plan that they should both be as highly educated as it was possible to be in their country at that time. In any case, they belonged to a people who were undoubtedly the best educated nation on earth in all the things that really matter, and in whose Sacred Writings, communicated by the Holy Spirit of God to their prophets, priests, kings and wise men, there is to be found everything that is essential for instruction in the true art of living, which resulted in the Jewish laws and customs being far superior to those of all other peoples. Proof of the excellence of Mary's own knowledge of the Scriptures and her religious practice are demonstrated in her beautiful poem, the *Magnificat*, whilst Joseph would have received the thorough teaching the Law required to be imparted to every Jewish boy. And so both Mary and Joseph must have been fully instructed in all this wisdom and equipped to dispense it to their son Jesus from His babyhood until such time as He was able to imbibe it for Himself.

But what sort of man in particular was Joseph, and what were his attractions in the eyes of Mary? In the Jewish society of those days, as a young unmarried girl she would have had little or no personal opportunity either for private conversation with him or for assessing his qualities for herself. Following local custom, she enjoyed the companionship of girls of her own age, but would have met young men of marriageable age only at national feasts and certain family celebrations. No doubt though, Joseph's praises would have been sung to her in advance by her father. The Gospel actually mentions two outstanding points in his favour of which her father must have told her: he was a „just man”, that is to say, he was a truly wise and holy young man and a faithful observer of the Law; and he was also of royal lineage, being a son of one of the families descended directly from king David from whom one day in God's own time the Jews expected that the Messiah, the saviour of his people, would issue. In addition, by hindsight, since the Gospel tells us that John the Baptist, who was to be the Herald of the Messiah, had been filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, it is a common opinion of theologians that Joseph, being even closer to Jesus than the Baptist, had been similarly blessed and filled with the Holy Spirit in order to make him the fit partner of Mary and mentor of the Son of God. On the other hand, he was apparently neither wealthy nor powerful in the

eyes of the world, merely an ordinary citizen with a respected position as an engineer-surveyor in his own township. All in all though, he was certainly the most desirable batchelor that any pious maiden could hope to marry.

As to Mary, she herself had been raised in the same spiritual tradition as Joseph. Hence she would have had no hesitation in trusting herself to a man of his breeding and upbringing; and we may also presume that in some obscure way they both had a connatural feeling that they had been made for each other. Yet Mary does not seem to have been conscious in advance of her grace of state, her Immaculate Conception, the essential preparation for her divine motherhood, nor did she or Joseph appear to have had any inkling of the respective roles that they were about to play in the Incarnation of the Divine Child, the most glorious gift ever given to a husband and wife. And so, although both of them entered upon their betrothal as virgins - the normal state of all those who in Judaism kept the commandments of God perfectly from their youth - they also must have believed that God was leading them into a holy and fruitful marriage, which was indeed to happen - though not quite in the way they thought!

The ancient Jewish ceremony of betrothal was a simple one. The bridegroom-to-be in the presence of the two families presented his fiancée with a token, often a ring, with the formula: „Behold, you, N., are betrothed [consecrated] unto me with this ring in accordance with the Laws of Moses and Israel”. The betrothal therefore marked the establishment of the spiritual and legal union, which in the case of Mary and Joseph was destined to provide the proper setting for the Incarnation of the Messiah.

The next stage in God's plan was to bring into existence the Prophet who was to be His official Precursor and Herald some thirty years later. St Luke's Gospel begins by recording the appearance of the angel Gabriel to the aged priest Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, likewise advanced in age and furthermore barren, in the Temple in Jerusalem at the hour of Prayer in order to offer incense, while the people were praying without. The Angel said to him:

„Fear not, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John” (Lk 1,13).

Then the Angel went on to say that this child was to have the privilege of being the immediate Forerunner of the Messiah himself.

Zechariah, holy though he was, was taken aback and, on account of his and his wife's advanced age, would not believe the Angel without a sign. The Angel therefore rebuked him for his lack of faith in hesitating to accept the message of God and told him that he would be struck deaf and dumb and be unable to speak until his child was born; for Zechariah was not permitted to be an obstacle to the fulfilment of the divine plan. Elizabeth of course conceived the promised child in due time, though when her pregnancy reached the stage when it became visible to her neighbours, she withdrew into seclusion, unable to cope with their prying eyes and sharp tongues. Note that God was not forcing a child on this childless couple, but, on the contrary, giving them not only the child they had always desired and had given up hoping for, but one with a destiny vastly superior to all expectation.

The third step in God's over-all plan for the entry of the Messiah in person into the world marks a further gratuitous initiative on His part to demonstrate that the Incarnation is His own free and untrammelled intervention to save mankind from its hopeless

condition. This time the angel Gabriel was sent to the Virgin who, unbeknownst to the world, had been prepared from all eternity to be the Bride of the Holy Spirit and who had now also been pledged to become the wife of her man Joseph.

The Angel's visit was apparently timed out of delicate consideration to take place only a few days before the actual wedding day in order to ensure that no one might suspect that the conception of Jesus had predated it, so that His birth nine months later could cast no doubt on Joseph's paternity and thus the Child's Davidic descent. At that time all the preparations for the wedding procession and banquet had been completed and the invitations sent out and accepted, and everything was in good order for the great day. This then seems to have been the precise moment, chosen at God's command, for the angel Gabriel suddenly and yet peacefully to come to Mary in visible form while she was alone. Normally the advent of an angel induces a holy fear and consternation upon the recipient of the visitation, but she received the grace not to be flustered by it and ready to listen with full attention to the greeting which was couched in terms of extreme courtesy and reverence:

„Hail, Full-of-grace, the Lord is with you”.

As soon as Mary heard these words, she realised that such a noble greeting portended a matter of great significance, in fact a special call to divine service as had happened to some of her ancestors; and this gave her to think furiously. And so, although in full control of herself, she was also profoundly apprehensive lest she should be unequal to what the Lord had appointed for her. For as St Luke wrote (1,29):

„She was greatly troubled at the saying and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be”.

Gabriel did not leave her in suspense, but continued at once with:

„Fear not, Mary, for you have found favour with God”,

and then began to speak of the magnitude of the gift that God was about to give her, which was that she was going to conceive a son whom she was to call Jesus. Though this was welcome news, it came as no real surprise for her to learn it even from the lips of God's messenger, since Joseph was on the point of coming to take her to his home. It seemed simply a confirmation in advance of what she was hoping for anyway: to have the son she and Joseph desired.

However, the next utterance of the Angel introduced a new and totally unexpected vista by adding that the Babe the Lord was going to give her was to be no ordinary child, but would be „Great” and would be the „Son of the Most High”. Furthermore, God would „give him the throne of his father David, and he will rule over the House of Jacob forever and his kingdom will have no end” (Lk 1,32-33). These words plainly indicated to Mary that she was going to conceive the long-foretold Messiah. Like all devout Jews, she would have been familiar with the various prophecies about him; moreover, in view of her marriage to Joseph, a direct descendant of king David, she also expected the Messiah, the Son of David, to come from some branch of Joseph's family. But what must have startled her was what no ancient prophet had ever coupled together, that the Messiah was to be not only the Son of David but also the Son of God, and, most astoundingly, that he was to be the Son of God not in a mere metaphorical sense like all „sons of God” but truly and actually! For to be able to reign for ever in an everlasting kingdom, as the angel had just revealed to her, the child himself would have to be eternal like God his Father, and she

would have realised that this was possible only if he shared His Divinity. The significance of the angel's announcement must have weighed heavily upon Mary. Having always been willing and ready to serve her Lord God in loving obedience, it now dawned on her that He had chosen her to serve Him in a unique way by going to make her the mother of His only Son.

But this was not the time to become emotional. There were still other matters to be considered; for whilst her future husband Joseph might father the Son of David, she knew that it was impossible for him to be the begetter of the Son of God. Yet, since the angel had been quite definite that her child was to be the Son of David, she had no doubt that this would be so because of her marriage to Joseph from whom the child would take his Davidic descent. Nevertheless, aware of the prophecy of Isaiah 7,14 that the Messiah would be conceived and born of a virgin, she must have understood that she would be conceiving in the virginal state, although this ruled out any conjugal relations with her husband and thus blood ties between him and her child. Then again, it must have occurred to her that the child would certainly be presumed to be Joseph's because he would be born in due time after their home-taking ceremony, unless her husband denied the paternity. But why should he do that? If he was indeed the just man her father had told her, would he not unhesitatingly recognise that God was especially blessing their marriage and joyfully acknowledge her Divine Son as his own? Thus the child would truly be the Son of David! Apparently therefore she did not consider this particular aspect worth worrying about, certainly not at the moment. The above would seem to be the main considerations that raced through her mind until she had satisfied herself that she had fully understood the message. Hence, while accepting God's decision that she was to become pregnant and give birth as a virgin, the only important question left that she was unable to answer herself was by what process it was to come about that she will be conceiving the Son of God. Hence she asked the angel:

„How shall this be, since I am not knowing a man?“

To which he promptly replied:

„The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Holy One Begotten will be called God's Son“.

This made everything clear to her; the Holy Spirit will transcend the normal process of begetting a child by taking possession of her womb and causing her to conceive God's Son.

She realised then that her God, the author of all human life, was about to give her the Child that she and Joseph had been longing for, but through a unique and marvellous exchange. Instead of a child by Joseph, her husband, she was to receive her child directly by means of the Holy Spirit. As far as she was concerned, this was all she required to know. For if this was the Will of God now made known to her through the angel Gabriel, she accepted it in simple faith, leaving to God Joseph's reaction, and not knowing how she would cope with the Child after its birth. All she was certain of was that, there and then, this was God's Will for her, and that she, in some ineffable way, was to become the very Bride of the Holy Spirit and the mother of this Divine Child. She saw that she must leave it to God to work out her own future and that of the Child as well as her new relationship with the one man she had hitherto expected to be the father of her child.

In order to aid her to adjust to this unparalleled exercise of God's Power, Gabriel informed her that her relation Elizabeth had conceived a son nearly six months before despite her old age, thus demonstrating that every Word of God comes to pass as soon as uttered. And so Mary, with total faith and confidence in the efficacy of God's Word and her heart overflowing with rejoicing and gratitude, yet no less in awe, exclaimed in an allusion to the Angel's opening greeting:

„Behold God's servant! Be it done to me according to Thy Word”.

According to the teaching of the Doctors of the Church, as soon as she had said these words she conceived by the Holy Spirit.

St Luke's Gospel, as has so often been pointed out, only tells Mary's side of the events. We have to turn again to St Matthew's Gospel to discover how God's angel instructed Joseph to act in the light of the news of Mary's miraculous pregnancy. We learn that Joseph was given confirmation by the Angel (probably at once on account of the imminence of the home-taking ceremony) of the astounding news that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit (Mt 1,18). Having accepted the news as a fact, knowing that Mary would not lie, his first reaction was to break off the betrothal and to divorce her as quickly and quietly as possible. After all, considering that it was unthinkable for a law-abiding Jew to marry a woman who was pregnant with the child of another man, how much more unjustifiable would it be for him to live with the woman who was now bearing the Child of God? Joseph saw the full import of the burden that was to fall on Mary, but had no satisfactory solution for the problem of what to do with her, while shrinking from the scandal of divorcing her. In any case, a formal divorce was probably not a feasible option for him, since he would have been required to make a financial settlement as stipulated in their marriage contract, for which he may have lacked the resources. All he could think of was to dismiss her privately without exposing her pregnancy; but then he could not protect her from being branded as an unmarried mother and her child as a fatherless bastard, deprived of full civil and religious rights. Since the angel Gabriel had given Mary no hint as to how they were to cope with their quandary, and the wedding was imminent, Joseph must have been in great agony over what was humanly speaking an impossible dilemma. Neither he nor she could risk telling the world the truth, for nobody would believe them, and she would not only be disgraced but probably stoned as an adulteress. And all this was apart from the pain he would have felt at having to let go of the woman he loved above all, while she too faced the bleak prospect of losing the man she loved above all other men.

However, in view of the urgency of a decision, it would seem that the Lord God did not allow Joseph to remain for long in uncertainty. Joseph had apparently given himself the night to think it all over and come to a decision; but during that very night he had a vivid dream in which an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said:

„Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a Son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1,20-21).

When Joseph heard these words, his heart must have leapt for joy and relief that he was after all to complete the marriage rite and take Mary to his home as the mistress of his household just as they had previously planned. Furthermore, by telling Joseph to name the Child at His Circumcision, the Angel signified that God was conferring on him legal paternity and so granting him all the rights of fatherhood in the eyes of Israel and of the

world and thereby making the Divine Child also truly the Son of Joseph and the „Son of David”. This meant that, as a unique gift of the Lord to them both, the Child was to be theirs all the same, yet in an entirely unparalleled way. He would be able to grow up like any ordinary human child, without the neighbours knowing His true heritage, until it was in the will of His Heavenly Father to reveal the next step in His plan of Salvation. For the benefit of their Divine Child their married life was however to continue in a celibacy that transcended all conjugal relations and at the same time increased day by day their mutual love for each other. Joseph then was to be his Virgin-Father, as Mary was always to be the Virgin-Mother both before and during her pregnancy, but also thereafter, for Christian tradition has been unanimous that the sole purpose of her marriage to Joseph was to make possible the procreation, through the Holy Spirit, of the God-Man who sums up all humanity in Himself for all time.

When Joseph told Mary the next morning about the message of the Angel, they must have been overwhelmed with gratitude at the marvellous Design of God in giving them this stupendous gift of the Divine Child, for His upbringing would cement their marriage and constitute their lifework. There never was, nor will there ever be, another wedding so profoundly full of joy and thanksgiving as that of Mary and Joseph in their secret sharing of the knowledge of the glorious Son who was to be born to her in nine months' time. For Mary was now already bearing Him under her heart, whilst Joseph must have been delighted at the thought that he was not only to be her husband, though a chaste one, but also the guardian, protector and teacher of the Son of God who by Divine Providence was also truly his own son of Davidic descent.

Nevertheless they must have been greatly relieved when the festivities and the bustle of hospitality had come to an end and they were free for Mary to pay a visit to Elizabeth to congratulate her on her own forthcoming child. Apparently without further delay she set out, Joseph escorting her, as propriety required. The three months that they spent in the company of Elizabeth and Zechariah were to provide them with the breathing space that they needed to come to terms with the realities of their situation and to recognise that God still required them to live by faith and not by sight. Probably the leaping of the infant John in his mother's womb when Elizabeth heard the sound of Mary's greeting was the first thrilling intimation to the latter that her own Son was already beginning His world mission. We may now leave those two holy women to each other's saving company with the remark that Mary's *Magnificat* and Zechariah's *Benedictus* aptly sum up the inspired thoughts and feelings of those two blessed couples during the months preceding the birth of John.

In the above account of the steps taken by God to bring about the Incarnation we have the perfect example of the way in which God always achieves the object of His loving activity on behalf of the human race by delicately making use of the human institutions He has set up while totally respecting the free will of His creatures.

In the light of the above understanding of God's plan for Mary and Joseph, there is no need to expect them to have taken a vow of celibacy either before or at the time of their betrothal. The principal argument for their taking such a vow was always the mistaken exegesis of Mary's question: „How shall this be, since I know not man?” For this question has often been taken to mean, „I cannot have this child because I have taken a vow of virginity”. However, Mary was only very sensibly asking how it was to come about that

she would conceive this Divine Child, and not how her virginity would be safeguarded. Had she herself got to do anything by way of preparation or was she simply to await whatever action God would take? Gabriel understood why she framed her question as she did, and answered that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit coming upon her. And so it happened.

It is at last becoming recognised by scholars that it was impossible in practice at that time for any couple even to think of a celibate marriage; and Catholic scholars have now acknowledged this to be so<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, from the human and historical angle Mary and Joseph had no motive whatever for embarking upon a celibate marriage, for they had no idea of God's plan for them when He allowed them to enter upon their betrothal. Indeed, Almighty God made use of their noble and generous free-will and desire to have offspring, and so neither was Joseph deprived of his own son, nor Mary of a son of Joseph, for the Lord blessed their marriage uniquely by sharing parenthood of His own Son with both of them.

Thus Mary and Joseph were in fact to have the best of both worlds - this world and the world to come - while Jesus was to enjoy having a Virgin-Father and a Virgin-Mother, the best of human parents in preparation for His vocation on earth!

## ZARĘCZYNY I ZWIĄZEK MAŁŻEŃSKI MARYI Z JÓZEFEM

### MEDYTACJA BIBLIJNA

(*Streszczenie*)

Artykuł stanowi rozważanie tekstów biblijnych dotyczących zaślubin Maryi i Józefa na tle tradycji judaistycznej i panujących wówczas obyczajów. Autor dowodzi, iż zaręczyny Maryi i Józefa oraz oczekiwania, jakie towarzyszyły narzeczonemu - zwłaszcza pragnienie potomstwa - nie różniły się od tego, co przeżywały pary zakochanych w owych czasach. Dopiero Boża interwencja w scenie Zwiastowania (Łk 1, 26-38) oraz objawienia Bożej woli Józefowi (Mt 1,19-25) wprowadziła nowy wymiar w ludzką relację miłości Maryi i Józefa.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. MCHUGH, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, London 1975.