



Meet the Parents

Matthew's Annunciation Story (Matthew 1:18-25)

LUKE'S STORY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS CAPTURES THE IMAGINATION THROUGH ITS HIGHLY VISUAL STORY THAT HAS INSPIRED POETS, HYMN-WRITERS AND ARTISTS. MATTHEW'S STORY IS DARKER, BUT IT HAS MUCH TO TEACH US, ESPECIALLY ABOUT THE ROLE OF JOSEPH

BY JONATHAN BURROUGHS

Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy that lists the ancestors of Jesus (see Matt 1:1-17). The genealogy opens with a line that refers to Jesus as a son of King David: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). Near the end of the

genealogical list, it is stated in 1:16 that "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." The careful reader of Matthew's Gospel will notice that the genealogy traces the lineage of Jesus through Joseph (that is, not Mary). This raises an important question: if Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus,

and his mother Mary is not said to be a descendent of David, how is Jesus part of the ancestral line of David? In other words, how can Matthew begin his Gospel by referring to Jesus as a son of David? Matthew's account of the annunciation of Jesus' birth to Joseph (1:18-25) takes up this difficulty and weaves into a narrative to explain how Jesus is a son

of David. In so doing, Matthew's reader is introduced to (or meets) the parents of Jesus: Mary, Joseph and, of course, God the Father. But, what in particular does Matthew tell us about Jesus' parents in his annunciation story?

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MARY AND JOSEPH'S BETROTHAL SITUATION

The focus of Matthew's annunciation story is on the circumstances surrounding the origin of a child, not on the birth itself. It begins with Mary, who is betrothed to Joseph but not living with him, being found with child from the Holy Spirit (1:18). Here, the characters of Mary and Joseph are introduced into the narrative and their situation is indicated. Betrothal is not the equivalent of a modern engagement; it possesses stronger legal dimensions and nearly constitutes a marriage contract, with possibilities of adultery, divorce, and widowhood. At an early age (sometimes at twelve or twelve and a half years) a girl is promised by her father to her future husband, which results in a period of betrothal preceding the marriage (see Deut 20:7). During that period, the betrothed woman continues to live with her parents and the marriage is not yet consummated. Nevertheless, the woman is deemed a "wife" (see 2 Sam 3:14; Judg 14:15; 15:1). It is during this interim period that the drama of Matthew's annunciation story is set. The reader is to understand that Mary and Joseph, although betrothed to one another, are not yet residing together. Thus, the narrator, at the beginning of the passage, is implying that Mary's pregnancy is not the result of a physical act between Mary and Joseph.

JOSEPH'S INITIAL REACTION

In 1:19 the narrator outlines the initial reaction of Joseph to Mary's situation: "Her husband

Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss [or divorce] her quietly" (1:19). The nearness of betrothal to marriage is evident in the narrator's designation of Joseph as "her husband" who plans to "dismiss" her, in other words, to "divorce" her. For Mary to be with child before they lived together would have been understood as dishonouring Joseph and is reason for

divorce or even, although it was rarely carried out in the first century, execution by stoning (see Deut 22:13-27). It is important to note that it is only with the intervention of the angel of the Lord in the next verse (1:20-21) that Joseph is informed that the child is from the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is implied that Joseph intends to divorce Mary as he suspects her of having had sexual intercourse with another man. The narrator's designation of Joseph as a "righteous man", that is, a law-abiding Jew, is linked to his intention to divorce Mary quietly: seeking divorce in cases of adultery was not optional but practically automatic according to Jewish law (see Deut 22:13-27). It is this atmosphere of scandal that forms the background to Matthew's annunciation story.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND GOD THE FATHER

An angel of the Lord, by echoing the narrator's earlier statement in 1:18 that the child is from the Holy Spirit, removes the suspicions of Joseph and makes Mary acceptable to him (1:20-21). Through a dream, the angel intervenes and tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, as the child is from the Holy Spirit (1:20). The angel of the Lord is a messenger of God, who reveals the origin of the child to Joseph. It also communicates to the reader that Jesus is the result of divine intervention into human history: through the Holy Spirit, God is at the origin of Jesus. Divine intervention in the birth of God's chosen ones was a convention in the Jewish Scriptures (see, for example, Isaac in Gen 18:1-15 and 21:1-7; Jacob in Gen 25:21; Samuel in 1 Sam 1:4-20; Samson in Judg 13:2-25). In his story of the annunciation, Matthew goes further than these biblical accounts. Unlike any other biblical character, there is no male involved in Jesus' conception; he is "from the Holy Spirit". In all other biblical accounts of births that involve the Spirit, a male is involved. Matthew narrates something different and unique; the Holy Spirit does not take the place of a male. In other words, the Evangelist does not suggest, however asexually, that the Holy Spirit fulfils the sexual role of the male. Moreover, the Evangelist is concerned with



the origin of Jesus rather than the details of his conception. By ascribing Jesus' origin to the Holy Spirit, Matthew shows that Jesus is different from every other biblical character.

JESUS AS EMMANUEL

The second part of the angel's message to Joseph shifts the focus of the passage from the present situation to events that will occur later in the Gospel: "She will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). Mary's child will be the Saviour of his people. The saving activity that is prophesied about the child offers further encouragement for Joseph to take Mary as his wife and accept the child as his own. The angelic dream sequence (1:20-21) is followed by a quotation from Isaiah 7:14 that expresses the significance of what is happening: the child will be called "Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'" (1:22-23). This is a direct address to the reader, and it is implied that no character, including Joseph, hears these words. While the earlier references to the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20) indicate that Mary's pregnancy is not the result of sexual activity, it is the fulfilment quotation that explicitly identifies her as a virgin. The question of whether Mary remains a virgin after childbirth is one that has been extensively discussed by biblical scholars,

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however, it is not Matthew's main concern here. Actually, Matthew is attempting to show how Jesus is a son of David despite the virginal conception! The primary reason for the use of Isaiah 7:14 is not due to the prophecy of a virgin birth; rather, it is due to the promise that the child will be called Emmanuel. Emmanuel is not a personal

name but is a title descriptive of Jesus' role in bringing God's presence to his people. For Matthew, when Jesus is active, God is with his people.

JOSEPH AS JESUS' LEGAL FATHER

Due to the intervention of the angel in 1:20-21, Joseph revises his initial reaction of divorcing Mary quietly. Matthew's annunciation story concludes with Joseph following the commands of the angel by taking Mary as his wife and naming the child (1:24-25). In so doing, Joseph, who is earlier addressed as "son of David" (1:20), acknowledges the child as his own and brings Jesus into the ancestral line of David. Joseph therefore accepts fatherhood of Jesus according to Jewish law and, in essence, adopts Jesus. As the annunciation story unfolds, Joseph emerges not as the biological father of Jesus, but as Jesus' legal father. In this way, Jesus is a son of David through the law. There is a shift regarding the righteousness of Joseph: he moves from planning to dismiss Mary quietly to naming and becoming the legal father of Jesus. Matthew shapes his narrative in such a way that Joseph is the first character in his story that is required to commit himself to Jesus for the purposes of God.

THE HOLY FAMILY AND THE WORLD MEETING OF FAMILIES

Matthew's annunciation story is told from the viewpoint of Joseph (for example, he receives the announcement of the birth and names the child), which gives the story, to a certain extent, an androcentric and patriarchal nature. On the other hand, Mary is arguably the most important character: being with child from the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20), and subsequently bearing the child (1:21, 25), are the key to the entire passage. All other events in the passage are based around this primary event. Behind this primary event is God the Father: the Holy Spirit, the angel of the Lord, and the quotation from Isaiah are biblical ways of speaking about God. Matthew characterises



the Holy Family as an unconventional one: for example, Mary and Joseph were not living together, Mary was pregnant before wedlock, and Joseph was not the child's biological father. There is also, in effect, an adoption dimension to the story: Joseph adopts, in a legal sense, the son of God. This results in Jesus having paternity at two levels: (1) God the Father and (2) Joseph.

In the build up to the World Meeting of Families in 2018, it may be worth reflecting on how Matthew's annunciation story can inform the conception of what constitutes family today. Reflecting on the unconventional and precarious situation of Mary and Joseph as narrated in 1:18-25 may, as Pope Francis exhorts in the final paragraph of *Amaris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*), help to keep "us from judging harshly those who live in situations of frailty" (AL 325). As we discern what values underpin family, the example of the Holy Family may make us aware, when discussing the current reality of the family, not to rigidly propose "a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families" (AL 36). 

Dr Jonathan Burroughs is a Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, St Patrick's Campus, Thurles. Jonathan's PhD dissertation was a narrative-critical investigation of the Spirit in the Gospel of Matthew. Jonathan and his wife Elaine are the parents of a baby girl called Faye.