

§ 009

THE ANNUNCIATION TO JOSEPH OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. ¹

Matthew 1:18-25

Introduction

1. Charles Haddon Spurgeon said that a word or two sufficed to describe the birth of all the kings whose names we have read in the genealogy; but for our Lord Jesus Christ there is much more to be said.
 - The evangelist girds himself up for his solemn duty, and writes:—*"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise."*
 - It is a deep, mysterious, and delicate subject, fitter for reverent faith than for speculative curiosity.
 - The Holy Ghost wrought in the chosen virgin the body of our Lord.
 - There was no other way of his being born; for had he been of a sinful father, how should he have possessed a sinless nature?
 - He is born of a woman, that he might be human; but not by man, that he might not be sinful.
 - See how the Holy Ghost co-operates in the work of our redemption by preparing the body of our Lord!²

¹*The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (Mt 1:18-25). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² Spurgeon, C.H. (2009). *The gospel of the kingdom: A commentary on the book of Matthew* (3). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

2. The story of Jesus' birth is told in a beautiful and simple style.
 - There are matter-of-fact statements about the most mysterious aspects of the conception of Jesus.
 - The Incarnation took place by the agency of the Holy Spirit in the life of a young woman referred to as a virgin.
 - The passage tells us that Mary was betrothed to Joseph, and that they had not consummated their marriage in sexual relationship.
 - It refers to Joseph as her husband, yet in the angel's message Joseph is addressed as Son of David and urged not to hesitate to go through with his marriage to Mary, who is referred to as his wife.

3. To understand this one must recognize that in Jewish marriage there were three steps:
 - a. The first step was the engagement, a contract arranged by family members who determined whether the couple would be well suited for each other and for a future marriage.
 - b. Second, there was the betrothal, the public ratification of the engagement, with a period of one year for the couple to become known as belonging to each other, but not having the rights of living together as husband and wife.
 - The only way a betrothal could be terminated was by a divorce.
 - In Jewish law there is a phrase which states that a young woman whose fiancé dies during the period of betrothal is called "a virgin who is a widow."
 - Mary and Joseph were in the second stage in the account of this text.
 - c. The third stage is the marriage proper, which took place at the end of the year of betrothal.

4. It was during the year of their betrothal that Mary made known to Joseph that she was with child by the miraculous act of God.
 - Joseph is referred to as a just man with special love and consideration for Mary.
 - Confronted with the problem of his betrothed being pregnant, he contemplated how to end the betrothal in a divorce.
 - He sought ways to do it privately rather than to expose her publicly.
 - In his careful contemplation, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph with a message from God.³

³ Augsburg, M.S., & Ogilvie, L.J. (1982). *Vol. 24: The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 24: Matthew*. Formerly The Communicator's Commentary. The Preacher's Commentary series (18). Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc.

Commentary

1. *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.* Having shown that Jesus has the correct scriptural pedigree to be the Messiah, Matthew now explains how the events surrounding his birth fulfill the Scriptures.⁴
2. The term *virgin birth* is a misnomer.
 - Neither Matthew nor Luke describes Jesus' birth at all but only his _____⁵.
 - The apocryphal *Protevangelium of James* 19:3, an important source for the traditional Catholic doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, is in fact the main source for the unscriptural notion that Mary's hymen was not broken at the time of delivery.⁶
3. The situation described in verses 18-19 is Joseph's legal engagement to Mary.
 - If typical Jewish custom were followed, she may well have been still a young teenager.
 - Joseph may have been considerably older.

⁴ Having shown that Jesus has the correct scriptural pedigree to be the Messiah, Matthew now narrates five ways in which the events surrounding his birth fulfill the Scriptures. The first of these is the most remarkable, miraculous, and controversial. Unfortunately these verses are often studied in isolation from chap. 2. Matthew's use of Scripture here, in fact, fits a consistent pattern throughout his opening chapters. He selects and describes events in a way that calls to mind a certain Old Testament text or theme. The correspondence is not exact enough to substantiate charges that Matthew has fabricated history to create fulfillment of prophecy, [See esp. R. T. France, "Scripture, Tradition and History in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew," in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 239–66.] but he nevertheless tailors his narratives to bring out as many of the similarities between text and fulfillment as possible. This relationship, however, is not always straightforward. In two cases the Old Testament texts cited do not even have future tense verbs in them. Rather, Matthew is operating typologically. Old Testament events, viewed as of crucial significance in the history of salvation, are seen to display patterns of God's activity, which are being repeated in the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Such parallels can be attributed only to God. [Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 40: Matthew's typology may be defined as "the recognition of a correspondence between New and Old Testament events [persons and institutions], based on a conviction of the unchanging character of the principles of God's working."] A text that may well have had a previous historical referent is seen as being *completed* or *filled full*, a common meaning of the verb *plēroō* ("fulfill"). [R. Schippers, "πληρόω," *DNTT* 1:733–41.] Much controversy in an often polarized and heated debate concerning Matthew's use of Isa 7:14 in v. 23 could be defused if these hermeneutical principles were recognized.

⁵ **conception**

⁶ Blomberg, C. (2001, ©1992). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (56). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

- Engagement in ancient Judaism was legally binding and required divorce if it were to be broken, but sexual relations and living together under one roof were not permitted until after the marriage ceremony.
- Joseph could therefore be spoken of already as Mary's husband, but Matthew emphasizes this was "before they came together."⁷

4. Matthew is clearly describing a _____⁸ conception here, but he uses remarkable restraint in that description (similarly Luke 1:35).
 - Most non-Christian legends of virginal conceptions were quite different and much more detailed and/or crass.⁹
 - Belief in this kind of conception obviously depends on one's approach to the supernatural more generally.¹⁰
5. On the virginal conception in particular, it is often said that such a belief stems from prescientific superstition.
 - But even the relatively primitive stage of first-century science was sufficiently advanced for people to know that in every other known instance it required a biological father as well as a biological mother to produce a human child.
 - The Christian notion of a virginal conception was no more plausible in first-century Judaism than it is in the twentieth-century Western world, yet it has formed an integral part of Christian belief for two thousand years.
6. Though Matthew expounds nothing of its significance here, the virginal conception has regularly been understood as a way by which Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine.
 - His father, in essence, was God, through the work of the Holy Spirit; his mother was the fully human woman, Mary.
 - As fully God, Jesus was able to pay the eternal penalty for our sins (verse 21) for which finite humanity could not atone.
 - As fully human he could be our adequate representative and substitutionary sacrifice.

⁷ See the Mishnaic tractate *Kiddushin* for a whole series of related laws; for the most relevant selection of these and other Jewish traditions, see D. C. Allison and W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 199.

⁸ **supernatural**

⁹ See Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 280–379.

¹⁰ On miracles in the Gospels, see esp. D. Wenham and C. Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986); and C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 73–112, and the literature there cited.

7. Joseph, however, knows nothing of this yet. We are not told that Joseph alone made the discovery of his wife's condition.
- Yet neither Matthew nor Luke refer to any other person.
 - It is evident from the evangelist's statement that Mary had revealed nothing to Joseph of the angel's message given to her and of her submission to the will of God.^{11 12}
8. When Joseph discovers Mary's pregnancy, he naturally assumes that she has been unfaithful to him.
- He is called a "righteous" man, which for Matthew does not imply sinless perfection¹³ but regularly refers to one who is law-abiding, upright in character, and generally obedient and faithful to God's commandments.¹⁴
9. *Joseph ... resolved to divorce her quietly.* Joseph did not want to expose Mary as an adulteress, yet neither would he marry one so obviously guilty of sin.¹⁵
- He therefore chose the one other option open to him, formal divorce proceedings in relative privacy, *λάθρα* (two witnesses were required).¹⁶
 - Thus Joseph's plan expresses simultaneously his righteousness and his charitable kindness. (*δειγματίζειν*, "make public example of," occurs elsewhere in the NT only in Col 2:15.)¹⁷

¹¹ Lenski, R.C.H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (41). Minneapolis, MN.: Augsburg Publishing House.

¹² The angel had directed her to her relative Elisabeth in the hill country, and she had gone to commune with this friend, but as far as Joseph was concerned, having no intimation as to what God's will might be, she left all in God's hands. This was an act of absolute reliance upon God, the more admirable the more we realize her situation as it must have been. An espoused woman, if found unfaithful, could be punished with death, Deut. 22:23, 24. To what extent this law was observed at this time we have no means of knowing. Mary had absolutely no means of proving her spotlessness to Joseph or to any other person in Nazareth. Misgivings and doubts of various kinds, we may well assume, assailed her. Her one refuge was to place herself altogether into the hands of God. And this was well. [Lenski, R.C.H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (41). Minneapolis, MN.: Augsburg Publishing House.]

¹³ B. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1980), 99: "proper conduct before God" —not tied to the concepts of salvation or grace, as in Paul.

¹⁴ Blomberg, C. (2001, c1992). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (57). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁵ Jewish laws typically required a man to divorce an adulterous wife (*m. Sota* 5:1), but Joseph proposes to divorce her "quietly," which is perhaps better translated "privately" (Goodspeed), in the sense of a settlement out of court.

¹⁶ Str-B H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, 4 vols. (Munich: Beck'sche, 1926–28) NT New Testament

¹⁷ Hagner, D.A. (2002). *Vol. 33A: Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary (18). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

10. *Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.* God quickly changes Joseph's plans.

- The angel comes in a dream, an important form of divine communication in the Old Testament and also in the chapters that frame this Gospel (compare 2:12–13, 19, 22; 27:19).¹⁸

11. The angel explains to Joseph that Mary has not been unfaithful and that her child has been supernaturally conceived.

- He reminds Joseph of his messianic lineage by calling him “son of David.”
- He commands Joseph not only not to divorce Mary but to go ahead and marry her.
- The child will therefore legally be Joseph's son and thus legally son of David.

12. Such a child will also obviously be very special.

- Part of this special role is now specified.
- He is to be named Jesus (Heb. *Yeshua*), which means *Yahweh is salvation* or “the Lord saves” (NIV marg.).
- His ministry will not first of all involve the physical liberation of Israel from its enemies but the spiritual salvation of God's people by removing the alienation from God which their sins have created. An echo of Psalm 138:7 appears here.¹⁹

13. *Joseph, son of David.* The deliberate reference to Joseph as υἱὸς Δαυίδ, “son of David” (the only place in the Gospel where this designation is applied to someone other than Jesus), underlines what Matthew has forcefully asserted through the genealogy of verses 1–17.

- Jesus, the _____²⁰ son of Joseph, as he shall become through Joseph's obedience, is therefore reckoned as of Davidic descent with the concomitant note of eschatological fulfillment.
- Several other very important elements of this and the next verse reinforce this, as we shall see.²¹

¹⁸ On specific Old Testament background, see R. Gnuse, “Dream Genre in the Matthean Infancy Narratives,” *NovT* 32 (1990): 97–120.

¹⁹ Blomberg, C. (2001, ©1992). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (59). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

²⁰ legal

²¹ Hagner, D.A. (2002). *Vol. 33A: Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary (18). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

14. *She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.* This verse, τέξεται δὲ υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν, “she will give birth to a son, and you shall name him Jesus,” depends directly upon the LXX of Isa 7:14, which is quoted in verse 23.²²

15. *For he will save his people from their sins.* αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν.

- The αὐτός is _____²³: it is *he* who will save his people.
- The introduction of Jesus thus far in Matthew’s narrative has been as the Son of David, the Christ (Messiah), the one who has come to fulfill the promises of God.
- The natural expectation regarding the significance of σώσει, “will save,” would be that it refers to a national-political salvation, involving in particular deliverance from the Roman occupation.
- Jesus had indeed come to save his people—the very meaning of his name in Hebrew, *Yeshua*, a shortened form of “Joshua” (Hebrew: *יְהוֹשֻׁעַ*, *Yēhōšua*), is “Yahweh is salvation.”^{24 25}

LXX The Septuagint, Greek translation of the OT

²² The naming of a male child took place formally at the time of circumcision on the eighth day after birth (cf. Luke 2:21). Names held far more importance in that culture than in ours, being thought of as linked with or pointing to the actual character and destiny of the individual (see H. Bietenhard, *TDNT* [G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., tr. G.W. Bromiley *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ET (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76] 5:254). The name Ἰησοῦς is not the name mentioned in the quotation of Isa 7:14 (see below, v23). The reason for the name Jesus is spelled out in the second part of the verse (γάρο). That it is already known is in accord with the rabbinic view that the Messiah was named before the creation of the world (*b. Pesahim* 54a; H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, 4 vols. [Munich: Beck’sche, 1926–28] 1:64).

²³ **emphatic**

²⁴ Hagner, D.A. (2002). *Vol. 33A: Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary (19). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

²⁵ The reader’s knowledge of the meaning of Ἰησοῦς via its Hebrew meaning is assumed by the γάρο without further explanation, indicating that this early Hebrew etymology had already become a part of the common tradition of the Greek-speaking church. (Cf. also the same etymology applied to “Joshua” [i.e., Ἰησοῦς] in the Greek *Sir* 46:1.) The surprise is in the content of the salvation that the Son of David will bring, namely, that he will save his people, ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν, “from their sins.” Although it was possible to associate even this with a national-political deliverance, Matthew and his readers could not easily have made this association after A.D. 70. The deliverance from sins is in a much more profound, moral sense and depends finally upon the pouring out of Jesus’ blood (26:28). Matthew and his readers knew well the kerygmatic significance of this verse. Ps 130:8, which probably is in Matthew’s mind (indeed, he may be giving a targumic rendering of it), provides similar language and finds its fulfillment here. In the same way, whereas τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ, “his people,” leads one to think initially of God’s people, Israel, both Matthew and his readers were capable of a deeper understanding of the expression wherein it includes both Jews and Gentiles, i.e. as the people of the messianic king (αὐτοῦ, “his”) who is both Son of David and Son of Abraham. We may thus finally equate this λαός, “people,” with the

16. “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.” The words of Isa 7:14, ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἕξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, “behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,” have their own historical context and primary level of meaning.
- The prophet there promises as a sign to King Ahaz and the House of David the birth of a royal son (perhaps Hezekiah) during whose infancy the two kings dreaded by Ahaz (i.e. of Syria and Israel) would suffer ruin.
 - Fulfillment is thus required in the immediate future.
17. While all this may seem relatively uncomplicated and of not very great significance, a _____²⁶ meaning in the promise was apparent to Jews of later centuries.
- Two things in particular were responsible for the later perception of this secondary level of meaning:
 - the name given to the child, “Emmanuel” (אֱמָנוּעַל, lit. “God with us”; cf. Isa 8:8, 10), and
 - the surrounding passages, which speak of the dawn of the promised golden age with the judgment of the wicked and the blessing of the righteous (e.g. Isa 2:2–4; 9:2–7; 11:1–16).
 - This was the ultimate sense in which God’s presence was to be manifested in Israel.
18. The promised son of Isa 7:14 thus became readily identifiable as that son of David who would bring the expected kingdom of security, righteousness, and justice.
- Accordingly, probably sometime in the third century B.C. the Greek translators of Isa 7:14 apparently regarded the passage as having a deeper meaning, as yet unrealized.
 - In agreement with this interpretation, they chose to translate the Hebrew word אַלְמָנָה, *almâ*; (which means “young woman,” who may or may not be a virgin), with the Greek word παρθένος (specifically “virgin”) rather than νεᾶνις (“young woman,” used by the later Jewish translations of Theodotion, Aquila, and Symmachus) in order to stress the supernatural associations brought to mind by the identity and work of this son.
 - Such an interpretation of the word is congruent with the larger picture.

ἐκκλησία, “Church,” of which Jesus speaks in 16:18. [Hagner, D.A. (2002). *Vol. 33A: Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary (19). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.]

i.e. *id est*, that is

²⁶ **deeper**

lit. literally

cf. *confer*, compare

e.g. *exempli gratia*, for example

- Matthew, unquestionably delighted with the agreement between the tradition about Jesus' birth and the words of Isaiah, not only prefaces the quotation with a formula of fulfillment but even conforms the wording of the surrounding narrative to that of the quotation.²⁷

19. Joseph ... did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. In keeping with his "righteous" character, Joseph obeys the Lord's directives.²⁸

Conclusion

Matthew now introduces his first Old Testament fulfillment quotation. Divine purposes are seen at work in the events that have just been prophesied. Matthew quotes Isa 7:14 in a form similar to that of the LXX. Isaiah's prophecy is viewed as God's word. "Immanuel" is translated for the benefit of those in Matthew's audience who could not understand the Hebrew.

The miraculous conception is itself not the primary focus of the quotation but understandably raises many important questions. What kind of woman was involved? How did Matthew understand the prophecy? Is such understanding legitimate? Discussion has tended to polarize around two extreme views. On the one hand, a majority of commentators assumes that Isaiah had only a *young woman of marriageable age* (Heb. *almah*) in view and that he was referring only to a child of his day—e.g., Hezekiah as the royal son and heir to the throne of King Ahaz, or Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (cf. Isa 8:4, 8), or some otherwise anonymous child named Immanuel. That there was originally no reference to the virginity of this child's mother and that Matthew's use of the text goes beyond anything that can be fairly attributed to the original intentions of the prophecy then follows naturally.²⁹ Conservatives have tended to react by saying that *almah* must be taken as a "virgin," that it refers only to a miraculous birth not previously fulfilled in any way, and that its only fulfillment was in the conception of Jesus.³⁰

An understanding of prophetic foreshortening of time (the Old Testament prophets often predicted in one and the same context various events that would take place in entirely different future eras), multiple fulfillment of prophecy (partial fulfillments often

²⁷ Hagner, D.A. (2002). *Vol. 33A: Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary (20). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

²⁸ Verse 25a goes beyond what the angel explicitly commands but further refutes any claim that might be made then or later that Joseph himself was Jesus' biological father. The grammatical construction translated "until" strongly suggests (but does not prove) that Mary and Joseph proceeded to have normal sexual relations after Jesus' birth.

²⁹ See, e.g., J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1985), 98-104.

³⁰ See, e.g., E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 288-94.

preceded and foreshadowed later complete fulfillments), and Matthew's use of typology, along with a careful reading of the larger context of the Isaiah quote (7:1–9:7), offers a mediating and more convincing alternative.³¹ The reference in Isa 7:15–16 to the short period of time in the promised child's life before the kings Ahaz dreads are destroyed seems to require at least a partial fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah's day. Nevertheless, the LXX translation of *almah* as *parthenos* (both words often though not always mean "virgin," though the Greek term is less equivocal) shows that some Jews already two hundred years before Christ favored an interpretation in which this immediate fulfillment was not seen as exhausting Isaiah's prophecy. Further exegetical clues in Isaiah support the LXX's interpretation. Isaiah 8:4, 8 seems to equate Immanuel with Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, but Isa 7:11; 8:18 suggests that this child will be a "sign," a term that regularly in Scripture refers to a more remarkable event than the simple birth of a child to a normally impregnated woman. By the time one reaches Isa 9:6, the prophet is speaking of a child, naturally taken as still referring to Immanuel, who is the "Mighty God." In no sense can this prophecy be taken as less than messianic or as fulfilled in a merely human figure. So it is best to see a partial, proleptic fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in his time, with the complete and more glorious fulfillment in Jesus' own birth.³²

Notwithstanding the extensive discussion his reference to a "virgin" has triggered, Matthew's own focus lies elsewhere. The passage climaxes by claiming this child to be "Immanuel," meaning *God with us*. Verse 21 introduces the key Matthean theme of God's presence with his people, which is emphasized again at the end of his Gospel in 28:18–20. The church in every age should recognize here a clear affirmation of Jesus' deity and cling tightly to this doctrine as crucial for our salvation. At the same time, Matthew wants to emphasize that Jesus, as God, is "with us"; deity is immanent. Too often those who have rightly contended for Jesus' full deity have created a God to whom they do not feel close rather than one who became human in every way like them but without sin (Heb 4:15). As God "with us," Jesus enables us to come boldly before God's throne (Heb 4:16) when we accept the forgiveness of sins he made available (Matt 2:21) and develop an intimate relationship with him.³³

³¹ For an explanation of these and related concepts and for an excellent survey of interpretations of Isa 7:14, see J. T. Willis, *Isaiah* (Austin: Sweet, 1980), 158–68.

³² Cf. esp. J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 207–13.

³³ Blomberg, C. (2001, ©1992). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (59). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.