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Mary and Joseph

The two people most directly involved in the account of the Lord Jesus' birth are, of course, Mary and Joseph. The Gospels begin their report with the viewpoint of Mary, to whom the announcement, or annunciation, of Jesus' impending birth is first given. It is only later that Joseph is made a part of the drama and this is (presumably within a few days) *after* he has been told that Mary is pregnant. We will follow the reports in the biblical order therefore, beginning with Mary and later looking at Joseph's role in the events.

Mary

Any study of Mary may fall on or between a number of possible errors and needs to be undertaken diligently and reverently, bearing in mind the subject matter. The two most extreme errors are, first, those of disbelievers in the virgin conception who either wittingly seek to slur or unwittingly acquiesce in the slurring of Mary's reputation, and second, those who elevate the virgin mother to a position not entertained anywhere in Scripture. This latter error is sometimes referred to as Mariolatry —the worship of Mary. It is not intended to look in any detail at Mariolatry as it is beyond the scope of this book. Instead we seek to allow the Scriptures themselves to place the correct parameters on Mary's position

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within the Christian faith. It *is* necessary, however, to look in detail at the former error as this is the proposition most frequently advanced by critics of the biblical account of the Nativity.

Why should the virgin conception have proved so controversial through the ages? Is it not slightly absurd, for example, for people who claim to believe in a supernatural, creative God, also to believe that somehow, the management of a birth without the agency of a human father is beyond Him? The reason for controversy is simply that both sides of the debate recognise the doctrine to be vitally important. In spite of this, some who are (or claim to be) adherents of the Christian faith, maintain that the doctrine is unimportant and that one can deny the virgin conception and still be a mainstream Christian. They say that the virgin conception is only referred to in two New Testament scriptures (Matt 1:18 and Luke 1:34-5) and once in the Old Testament (Isaiah 7:14), and so what the Bible deals with so scantily cannot be of great importance.

Most Christians would argue in reply that the doctrine of the virgin conception is indeed of fundamental importance, because only in this way can we begin to understand how God, the second person of the Trinity, could become a man and take human nature into *eternal union* with His divine nature. If the ‘virgin birth’ is false we have less ground on which to base the other essential truth of Christ, that of His sinlessness. And of course the legitimacy of His birth also comes into question. It would seem bizarre, to say the least, that a holy God should look down over His creation with all the options no doubt at His disposal for creating new life and decide upon an illegitimate birth to be the method to bring His holy and sinless Son into the world!

The two passages in the New Testament in which the fact of the virgin conception are clearly reported are of considerable importance:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

Matt 1:18

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one will be called the son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

Luke 1:34-35

The correct placing of these verses in the original texts has never been seriously doubted; practically every ancient manuscript includes them, except a mutilated copy of a manuscript of the Ebionites (a Jewish/Christian sect that denied Christ’s deity and which deleted many other things that alluded to His deity), and one Syriac reading of Matt 1:18 which is certainly wrong, but which critics sometimes claim may have predated other manuscripts. This says that Joseph begat Jesus—but then goes on to narrate the virgin birth, something the critics are less willing to own up to!

The second passage was written by Luke, who was a physician and therefore an educated man, who had accompanied the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys. These journeys encompassed many of the locations where the Gospel events took place. Whilst Paul was in prison in Caesarea, undergoing protracted investigations by the Roman procurators Felix and Festus (see Acts 24 and 25) Luke may well have had time to travel within Judaea and Galilee to interview surviving witnesses.¹ These witnesses may have included Mary herself. (Allowing that Mary was no more than eighteen years in 6 to 5 BC when Jesus was probably born, and knowing as we do that Luke accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey, AD 49-52, then Mary would have been in her late sixties at the time that Luke had an opportunity to meet her. Obviously this is supposition, but without doubt there would have been plenty of eye-witnesses still alive at the time.) Is it in any way credible that the apostle Paul, of whom Luke was a close companion over many years (see Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Philemon

24) was unaware of the virgin conception? Yet nowhere in his writings does Paul seek to deny it. If anything, he confirms it as he writes to the Galatians (Gal 4:4), “...when the time had fully come, God sent His son, born of a woman, born under law....” It is difficult to see why Paul would otherwise have made this statement, unless it was to affirm that the Lord’s conception was undertaken in a supernatural manner.

Detractors argue that the Greek word *parthenos* translated ‘virgin’ actually means ‘young girl’. This is disingenuous. Both the word and the context make it blindingly obvious that in Luke 1:34 Mary was referring to the fact that she had had no physical relationship with a man. Furthermore, the word *parthenos* always and unequivocally means virgin. It is interesting, in this regard, that the Hebrew word translated virgin in the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 is *almah*. The word *almah* usually, though not invariably, signifies a virgin. It was translated in the Greek Septuagint by the uncompromising word *parthenos*, which has only one meaning. The Septuagint was the Hellenist Jews’ standard translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek until the first century AD.² As Christians used the word *parthenos* to defend the virgin conception of the Lord Jesus, and made the Septuagint generally the Christian Bible, and as the Hebrew text was in any case undergoing revision in the first century, the first century Jews ceased to use the Septuagint and prepared a succession of revised Greek translations, in which *almah* was translated not by *parthenos* but by *neanis* —a young woman. A clear indication that the Jews were responding to the Christians’ testimony about the Lord’s miraculous conception —by altering their own Scriptures.

As we will, at a later stage, look in greater detail at the controversy surrounding the virgin conception, we will leave the subject here with the thought that Christians, at least, need to be clear where they stand on this issue and why. It really is not adequate to say, ‘on balance I believe in the virgin conception’, as some do, as though it is somehow difficult to believe in this aspect of the Incarnation, in the light of some perceived weight of contrary evidence, but on a balance of probabilities the story

is given a reluctant vote of ‘likely to be true, all things taken in the round’! Thinking logically through the statement ‘on balance I believe’ it quickly becomes apparent that for any person making such a statement *belief* is the one thing most assuredly absent—only a vague acquiescence to the likelihood that the biblical account is true.

Returning to Mary, it is noted that her humanness was no different from that of any other human person. She was, however, someone who rejoiced in God her Saviour (Luke 1:47) and was chosen by God to bear Jesus because she was ‘highly favoured’ (Luke 1:28), which implies that in some way the quality of her life and character was such that God found in her a *very* suitable person in the outworking of His great plan of salvation. Biblically, we can go no further than this. “She was a sinner as truly as any other woman,” says H. Brash Bonsall, “and saved by grace through faith in the atoning work of the Son, like others. She was a Jewess of the lineage of David through his son, Nathan, and was chosen to be the privileged instrument whereby the second person of the Godhead should lay hold of humanity and permanently unite human nature with his own divine nature. Mary’s blood, but not Joseph’s, flowed in His veins. The lineaments of Mary’s face would doubtless show in His own. Our Saviour was a Jew.”³

The announcement of the birth of Jesus, when the angel Gabriel came and spoke to Mary, can only have taken a few minutes. The Bible does not tell us where the appearance of the angel took place. It would have been somewhere private—probably in her own home. First, the angel tells Mary not to be afraid! No doubt any human person upon meeting such a spiritual creature would feel fear and apprehension. To allay those fears, Gabriel immediately tells her that she has found favour with God; in other words, the angel has not appeared as a portent of doom. Without further introduction or explanation, Gabriel goes on to tell Mary that she “will be” with child (note she is not already with child) and will give birth to a son, who is to be named Jesus. There is no pause here for a reply. Mary needs more information before she can make an appropriate response. Gabriel gives it: “He will be

great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Mary now has the essential information. To our modern minds, we might have liked some additional details, some additional assurance, some promise relating to our own personal interests! But not Mary. She has listened to the message and, in a limited way, understands what she is being told. To have told her any more would surely have been too much for her to bear. Jesus Himself would later teach His disciples, “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” It is only appropriate that the same lesson should have been applied to Mary. The reference to ‘his father David’ seems not to have caused any surprise or difficulty to Mary. She obviously would have been aware of her own lineage and the fact that there is no question by Mary of the Davidic aspect of the angel’s announcement supports the view that Jesus’ Davidic descent is provided by both his mother’s and Joseph’s side of the family (see later, the debate about the genealogies).

Mary’s immediate response to the angel Gabriel’s announcement is highly practical: ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’ She does not complain or argue, or even display fear; she simply questions the practicality of what has been announced. Gabriel then provides more information. The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, will come upon Mary and undertake the necessary extra-physical action that will translate her in her present state of virginity to the state of being a virgin ‘with child’. It is again beyond the scope of this study to look in detail at the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. Suffice to say that, in much the same way as He ‘comes upon’ all believers to a greater or lesser extent at the point of ‘re-birth’ (see John 3:16), so in the same way the Holy Spirit ‘came upon’ Mary and worked the miracle that we call the virgin conception. Having told Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, Gabriel adds that, ‘the power of the Most High will overshadow’ her. So it may be seen that, in a way we need not fully understand, the virgin conception was brought about by

two of the three persons of the Trinity, so as to enable the physical birth into the world of Jesus.

Gabriel goes on to provide a little more information, although it has not been requested. The holy one (Jesus) will be called the Son of God. Also Mary's childless cousin Elizabeth, though elderly in terms of child bearing, is in her sixth month of pregnancy, "...For nothing is impossible with God." The fact that Gabriel mentions Elizabeth's miraculous, though physically normal, pregnancy in this way suggests that Mary may not have known about it, or that if she did, it is now being revealed to her as a miracle brought about by God. Although we cannot be sure whether Mary knew about Elizabeth's condition or not, the text tells us that she "straightway" went to be with Elizabeth, to support her at a time when they shared so much in common. She stayed with Elizabeth for three months, presumably until John was born (Luke 1:56), at which point we may assume that Mary was herself pregnant, though not in a physically obvious way.

Mary's response to Gabriel's announcement has been admired by Christians for twenty centuries. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." There is in those words a humility and courage that needs to be learned and followed by all Christians. God always works for us and (if we let Him) with us. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). We are not told that in all things we will have an easy ride, or that all circumstances will be pleasant or conducive to our 'walk' with the Lord. Mary surely understood this. She did not fight against what God had chosen her for. She did not say "I'd rather you chose someone else" in the way that Moses did when he was chosen for his great mission (Exodus 4:13). Her acquiescence was not feeble or resigned. It was, rather, humble but with a strength of purpose and a simplicity rarely matched. Humility is, of course, a characteristic not much favoured by our world! But a right reckoning of our position before God – which is really what humility is – is highly favoured by God. With such people He is able to accomplish mighty acts.

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God was gentle in this process. He did not cause the miracle of conception to occur without informing Mary, as presumably He might have chosen to do. He was gentle with Mary as He is gentle with all his children —not pushing us further or faster than we can manage. He revealed to Mary only such knowledge as she could cope with. Mary’s humility in not asking for more information is, it needs to be repeated, one that Christians should take to heart. Not that God would have us to be dull witted or disinterested participants in His purposes, but that sometimes it has to be sufficient for us to know only partly what God’s purposes are and to trust Him for the rest. As the apostle Paul wrote, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully” (1 Cor 13:12). So for us, some things will only be fully understood as and when God eventually allows us to look back over our lives from His perspective.

We may presume that Mary could have rejected God’s plan for her, as individual Christians sometimes reject God’s plan for their lives. But Mary was chosen because she was highly favoured and she was so favoured, we assume, because God knew she would not reject His purposes for her. John Stott in his book *The Authentic Jesus* points out that it was a great privilege for Mary to be chosen to give birth to the ‘Son of the Most High God’, in the words of the Good News version of the Bible. But it was also an awesome and costly responsibility, involving a readiness to become pregnant before she was married, so exposing herself to the shame and suffering of being thought an immoral woman. As Stott comments with his characteristic clinical accuracy, the humility and courage of Mary in accepting God’s plan for her stand in stark contrast to the attitudes of church-based critics who deny the biblical account.⁴

Being specially chosen by God, and with His Holy Spirit very much at work in her life, we should not be surprised at Mary’s magnificent ‘song’ of praise (Luke 1:46-55) which reveals many deep spiritual truths. Mary’s response to the announcement of her pregnancy is to rejoice in God and glorify Him. She recognises that

she is immensely blessed and correctly predicts that all generations will see her as such. God, she acknowledges, is merciful to those who have a godly fear of Him, a fear (it might be added) that comes from a close relationship with Him, which is not the same as the God-aversion which often characterises those who rebel against Him. The proud, in stark contrast with Mary herself, will ultimately face the defeat of all that they have put their pride in, something which Mary calls being ‘scattered’. In God’s economy, it is the humble who are lifted high, contrasted sharply with mighty rulers who are brought down from their high places. It is the ‘hungry’ (the spiritually hungry) who are fed with good things, whilst the ‘rich’ (those who in their pride believe that they have all the answers and can look down on others) who will be sent away, empty. These are spiritual truths that are as relevant today as the day that Mary first ‘sang’ them.

Comparing Mary with Zechariah

The annunciation to Mary is the second that Gabriel has made concerning an impending birth. We follow the events in Luke chapter 1:

In the time of Herod King of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendent of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years.

Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of the incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: “Do

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not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will never take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.” The angel answered, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.”

Luke 1:5-20

In the appearance of the angel to Zechariah, one promise among the prophecies given by the angel seems to have taken root in the elderly priest’s mind—that of a son. The doubt which Zechariah expressed was almost subconscious: “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.” It is this demand for a sign that most distinguishes Zechariah from Mary. Jesus himself condemned the demand for ‘signs’ (Matt 12:38-39; John 4:48) so God’s displeasure at those who demand such signs should not surprise us. The tongue that failed to praise God but instead asked for a sign, got one! It was struck dumb!

We cannot help but compare Mary’s simple belief and acceptance with Zechariah’s unbelief. To our modern minds, the ‘punishment’ of Zechariah for his unbelief may seem harsh. At one level, it could be said that all he had done was to seek a little more information about this momentous event. There must, however, have been something in Zechariah’s unbelief which

was dishonouring to God. It might also be said that God, in His wisdom, sealed Zechariah's lips in such a way that he was unable to attract attention to the impending birth of his own son, John, nor to the vastly more important birth of Mary's son. Such news as Zechariah might have published abroad, had he been able to speak, would almost certainly have reached the ears of the religious authorities and probably the ears of King Herod, too. We know what Herod's likely reaction would have been. Had Zechariah not been 'shut up' for the period of his wife's pregnancy, the boy's subsequent life would have been impossible, even had he escaped Herod's interest. As it was, Zechariah was unable to speak during the period from the announcement until the eighth day after John's birth —probably the full nine months of a normal pregnancy. He must have done a great deal of thinking and praying during this time. His period of silence was a necessary one of personal preparation, giving him time to think through the implications of what Gabriel had announced to him. How wonderful it was that when Zechariah's tongue was finally loosed, it was immediately turned to the praise of God! (Luke 1:64).

It is deeply symbolic that the Gospel account in Luke should begin in the temple, indeed in the inner sanctuary of the temple – in the Holy Place – wherein was located the golden altar of incense. This was close to the heavy curtain (or veil) that separated the outer chamber from the Holy of Holies. It was to this altar of incense that Zechariah would have taken the incense, already lit with burning coals. It was in this place that the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to announce that his son would prepare the way for the Lord. The symbolism is found in the fact that it was in order to open up a permanent way to the Holy of Holies (in other words, to God Himself) that Jesus came, confirmed by the tearing of the veil from top to bottom as Jesus died on the cross (Matthew 27:51). No more would there be any need for priests to officiate as intermediaries between man and God. In Jesus' own words, His task had been finished (John 19:30; see also Heb 10:11-22) and in His death was created the new priesthood —that of all believers (1 Peter 2:9; Rev 1:6; Rev 5:10).⁵

Mary's period of pregnancy

Following the glorious announcement by the angel Gabriel of the impending birth of the Redeemer-King to Mary, we have seen that the only additional information she requested was to ask *how* she could be connected with it. The words she spoke were not words of doubt, or a demand for a sign, but only of willing self-surrender. The angel pointed her to the fulfilment of Israel's glorious hope, that of the Messiah, a hope that would have been as ever-present in the mind of a faithful Israelite as is today's similar hope among Christians of the Lord's second coming in glory and triumph. The hope of the Saviour was not strange to Mary—the only strange thing to this humble young woman was that *she* could have a part in His advent. Although Mary had not asked for a sign, she was never the less graciously given one—that of her own cousin Elizabeth.

The first thought and as far as we know, the first action, of Mary after the angel Gabriel had left her was to travel from Galilee to the hill country of Judea to be with her cousin Elizabeth. This would not have been a journey undertaken lightly. We do not know what domestic arrangements Mary had to put in place in order to undertake it, but it marked the beginning of a period in her life involving travel and uncertainty. Truly, for Mary life would never be the same again. To be with Elizabeth was vitally important to this young woman. It would enable her to open her heart to someone who would readily understand what she was going through and who might in a very real way be able to minister to Mary, while she in turn helped Elizabeth in her period of pregnancy.

It can have been no ordinary welcome that awaited Mary in Elizabeth's house. We may presume that, although unable to speak, Zechariah had been able to impart to Elizabeth a little of the momentous announcement concerning their son, and this in turn would have suggested the near advent of the Messiah. Luke sketches in the detail for us: "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard

Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (Luke 1:39-45). So these two Spirit-filled women were a comfort to each other.

We know nothing of Mary's pregnancy except that it must have been normal in all respects apart from the conception. The first three months of the period were spent, as we know, with Elizabeth. It is not clear from the text whether Mary stayed until John's birth or left shortly before. "Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home" is the simple detail supplied by Luke. Now, having returned home, Mary needed urgently to share her secret with her betrothed, Joseph.

Joseph

It is likely that Joseph and his intended, Mary, were closely related. Certainly both were of the lineage of David (see Chapter 11 on the genealogies). Mary could also claim kinship with the priesthood, being a 'blood relative' of Elizabeth who, as we know, was the wife of Zechariah, a priest. This suggests that Mary's family shortly before had held higher rank than that which the humble maiden now enjoyed, because custom was that the priesthood only married into such families. At the time of their betrothal, Joseph and Mary were extremely poor, as appears from the facts firstly that Joseph was a carpenter, a humble trade, and secondly that after Jesus was born, the offering made by the grateful parents in the temple was the lowest that the religious law allowed: a pair of doves or two young pigeons. A wealthier family, by contrast, would have offered a lamb (Lev12:7-8).

First century Jewish culture recognised two methods of betrothal: firstly in the presence of witnesses, either by the solemn word of mouth or by some prescribed formality, with the

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added pledge of a sum of money (however small) or some gift of money's worth; or secondly by writing (the so-called *Shitre Erusin*⁶); either way, the ceremony concluding with a prayer of blessing over a cup of wine tasted in turn by each of the betrothed. From that point the couple were betrothed 'man and wife', their relationship as sacred as if they were already married. Any breach of betrothal was considered as adultery. Betrothal could not be broken except by regular divorce. In spite of the betrothal and the fact that it might be many months before the actual marriage, the betrothed would not come together as man and wife. It was in this extremely solemn and serious way that Mary and Joseph were bound together.

It is the account of the Nativity given in Matthew's Gospel which provides Joseph's side of the story, and is written from his perspective. We take up the thread in chapter 1 verse 18, after Matthew's explanation of the genealogy of the Lord Jesus:

"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – which means "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

To the great and good man Joseph we owe a great deal. He displayed calm, courage, faith, obedience and honour which were evidently his essential characteristics. We do not know in what manner or with what words Mary shared her divine secret with her betrothed. It would be gratuitous prying for us to share this detail and would not in any way advance our understanding of the Lord Jesus if we did. The Bible treats the whole subject, as we would expect, with great delicacy. We are shown first that Joseph, having received the news and being a righteous man, wanted to do what he considered to be the best thing for himself and his betrothed, to divorce her quietly. Joseph could legally divorce his betrothed either publicly or privately, whether from change of feeling, or because he had found just cause for the action. Less honourable men might have wanted to take revenge by publicly disgracing their betrothed, but this was not the decision that came to Joseph. His private divorce would have left it open to doubt as to the grounds on which he had chosen to do so.

We might surmise that Joseph, as Mary, was selected by God to fulfil the legal role of father to the divine child, because he also was highly favoured. There was, no doubt, some combination of characteristics in the man Joseph which attracted God's attention to him as being suitable to fulfil a supremely difficult role. We might go further and suggest that God nurtured and encouraged Joseph as he developed to manhood to prepare him for the great task that God had set before him.

However conscious Mary was of the circumstance that had led to her condition, it must have been painful for her to have shared the news with Joseph. However deep his love for and trust in the woman he had chosen to be his wife, only a direct communication from God could dispel the doubts in his mind. It was that which he now received. The fact that the announcement came to him in a dream would more readily have disposed him to accept it as being from God. In popular Jewish custom a good dream was one of three things considered to be marks of God's favour ('A good king, a fruitful year, and a good dream'). In the dream, 'an angel of the Lord' appeared and delivered the message: "Joseph son of

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David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

In these fifty one words, the angel gave Joseph sufficient information on which to take Mary as his wife. Being addressed as ‘son of David’ would have grabbed his attention —it was an unusual salutation! The reference to his betrothed immediately brought the message ‘home’ and no doubt matched the matter that was most singularly on his mind. The naming of the unborn Messiah, as we have already seen, agreed with popular notions (the idea being that God would name six people from before their birth: Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Solomon, Josiah and the Messiah) and the symbolism of such a name was rooted in Jewish belief. The name itself, *Jeshua* (Jesus) was explained as meaning that He would save His people from their sins —one commonly understood office of the expected Messiah. No doubt Joseph understood this as referring to the people of Israel. His mind now set at rest on the issue of Mary’s faithfulness, Joseph could no longer hesitate. His duty towards the virgin mother and the unborn child demanded an immediate marriage which would afford not only physical, but also moral protection for both. So we read in Matthew 1:24-5, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”

Joseph made three distinct contributions to the history of the Incarnation. Firstly, **he protected the good name of Mary and of the Lord Jesus**, who was commonly accepted as the natural son of Joseph and Mary (e.g. Matt 13:55; Luke 2:48; John 1:45). Secondly, he **provided materially for the infant Jesus and his mother** through his trade a carpenter (Matt 13:55), a trade which the Lord Himself adopted until He began His public ministry. In Mark 6:3 Jesus is called ‘the carpenter’ —and some have inferred from this fact that by this time Joseph had died. And thirdly, **Joseph transmits to Christ his ‘crown rights’** as

Joseph represented in himself the regal-legal line. Being a direct descendant of David through Solomon he possessed the crown rights. "But for the misfortune of his race," writes H. Brash Bonsall "he would have been known not as the carpenter of Nazareth but as King Joseph I and, by Jewish law, he could pass on these rights to his foster son, Jesus the Christ."⁷ Alfred Edersheim makes a similar point as he refers to the prophecy in Isaiah 7:15: "Never had the house of David sunk morally lower than when, in the words of Ahaz, it seemed to renounce the very foundation of its claim to continuance; never had the fortunes of the house of David fallen lower, than when a Herod sat on its throne, and its lineal representative was a humble village carpenter...."⁸ What a contrast then, between the noble Joseph who should have held the throne of Israel, and the corrupt and ignoble Herod who actually sat on it!

The Lord Jesus and His parents as a family

We have considered some of the personal virtues in Mary and Joseph that help us to understand God's pre-selection of them through a long historic process which predated both of them and stemmed from their ancestor King David. That Mary was a good woman and Joseph a good man, there can be no doubt on the basis of biblical evidence.

The biblical records about the practical aspects of the Incarnation, especially the Nativity which brought it about, are strictly limited. We are given only the barest essentials to enable us to identify the Lord Jesus as God's promised Saviour. We perceive the reality of his birth which leaves us no doubt that, although His conception was unique, in every other way He was a normal human being and lived a normal human life. He fully identifies with those He had come to save and, in theological terms, perfectly and completely stands in the place of those who repent and believe, to face the holy wrath of God. (e.g. Rom 3:25; Rom 5:10-11; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 1 John 4:10). The biblical account of the Nativity does not give us any additional information which could serve to distract attention from the holiness and uniqueness

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of the Lord Jesus. To do so would be to run the very real risk of our admiration of these parents, chosen by God, becoming an unhealthy or even dangerous veneration of them. Such veneration is to be given only to the Lord Jesus, who is ‘the First and the Last’ (Rev 1:17) and to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matt 28:18).

What limited additional information we are given about the parents of the Lord Jesus shows us their humanity and fallibility, counterweights, perhaps, to their obvious virtues of humility and courage. So, despite the fact that both Mary and Joseph had had direct personal revelations from God via angelic messengers about the nature of their eldest son and the ministry He would undertake, despite also the visit of the shepherds, and their testimony – which Mary pondered in her heart (Luke 2:19); despite the amazing exclamations of Simeon and Anna in the temple; despite the visit of the *Magi* (‘wise men’) and the amazing and deeply symbolic gifts they presented; and despite the clear evidence of God’s hand being upon them and preserving them against the threat of Herod and delivering them to the safety of temporary residence in Egypt – in spite of all these evidences – still they misunderstood their eldest son.

So it was that, twelve years later, when Jesus was taken to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover (presumably with His siblings, although they are not mentioned) and Jesus stayed behind after His parents had set out for the return journey to Nazareth, when they eventually located Him in the temple, they gently rebuked him, pointing out to Him that they had been searching anxiously for Him (Luke 2:41-52). Jesus responded with the simple question “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” Luke points out (verse 50), “...they did not understand what he was saying to them.” and repeats once more that, “Mary treasured all these things in her heart.” Similarly, after Jesus has begun His ministry, we read in Matthew 12:46-49 that Jesus’ mother and brothers came to speak with Him. The context suggests (though this is only supposition) that they were a family delegation and had come to question Jesus, or even to persuade Him to return

with them. This was at a time of growing controversy and we cannot know what pressure His mother and brothers were under, as an indirect form of attack against Him. Jesus, without rushing to meet this family delegation, uses it as an opportunity to teach a spiritual truth— that His mother and brothers are those who do the will of His Father in heaven.

We also have a hint, but only a hint, that in some way Jesus was gently displeased by His mother bringing to Him, at a wedding feast in Cana, the problem that the host had run out of wine. Presumably such a domestic crisis would have been embarrassing, even shameful to the hosts, but not something, one would imagine, that demanded the intervention of God's Son. So Jesus says to His mother, "Dear woman, why do you have to involve me? My time has not yet come" (John 2: 4). But out of Mary's perhaps mistaken motive – we do not know that Mary expected Jesus to perform a miracle – comes Jesus' first miracle, a miracle that, although *prima facie* trivial in nature, nevertheless carried a deeper spiritual significance: the master of the banquet is unaware that he has delineated this deeper spiritual significance as he exclaims "Every one brings the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now!" The best that was saved until last was God's own Son, who had been preceded by so many prophets, each of whom had, in their way, pointed towards Him.

Mary and Joseph, then, shared the characteristic of all those who came into contact with Jesus, be they friends, family or disciples: they misunderstood Him. We cannot blame them for this. Had they fully understood their eldest son, fully understood His Divinity and His mission, then they would have found it impossible to be truly His parents. As a consequence of this He would have been unable to have led a normal human life (normal, it might be added, except that He never rebelled against His heavenly Father and therefore never sinned). Had Jesus been understood for who He was, then He could not in any meaningful sense have been subject to His parents —such knowledge would then have broken the bond of true humanity which the Lord Jesus shares with us. We could

not then have become His brethren and a very basic part of His mission could not then have been fulfilled—to be our kinsman-redeemer. We can apply this thought more generally: had Jesus’ Divinity not been kept a mystery whilst He was on earth, then the thought of His Divinity would have proved so engrossing to the people of His time, that His humanity, with all its lessons, could not have shone through. We would never have been able to see Jesus *the man*, and one crucial part of our salvation would have become wholly impossible.

Only one more thought needs to be added to complete our review of the Lord Jesus and His parents as a family unit. Some have held that the virgin Mary remained perpetually as a virgin. This is not supportable by the canon of Scripture. First, within the account of the Nativity itself, we read in Matthew 1:25 that Joseph had no union with Mary *until* she gave birth to a son. This clearly implies that their marriage became in every way normal after the Lord Jesus’ birth. Second, there are a number of references to Jesus’ siblings, which we have already seen. They are Matt 12:46-49; Matt 13:55-56 and Luke 8:19-21. James and Jude, cited as two of Jesus’ brothers, are thought by many scholars to be the authors of the epistles of those names. The reference to ‘all his sisters’ in Matt 13:55 implies that there were at least three of these.⁹ We are left, then, with the clear message that the Lord Jesus’ family was a normal human family, and in this very normality we find our identity with Christ as a human who lived in every way as we do, with the singular exception that He never sinned. And this is the great guarantee of our salvation—for only He could pay the debt to God caused by our sins.

Notes

¹ “I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning” (Luke 1:3).

² For more detailed information, see Appendix 4, *Biblical Sources*.

³ H. Brash Bonsall *The Person of Christ*, Volume 1: The Doctrine (CLC, 1967), p. 36.

⁴ John Stott *The Authentic Jesus* (Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1985), p. 65.

⁵At this point we need to look at some weighty theology: After the fall of mankind God provided a way of salvation and forgiveness whereby each individual sinner could find atonement for his sin *in anticipation of the cross*. We find instances of Abel, Noah, Abraham and others approaching God by way of sacrifice. Truly repenting and believing, and because of the shed blood of the innocent animal which had been sacrificed, the individual found forgiveness and peace with God. It appears similarly, that heads of families could sacrifice for their households and that patriarchs could sacrifice on behalf of their people. *All this was in anticipation of the cross* —but the essential requirement of the individual remained unchanged, i.e. faith in God and belief in the blood. The end of the era of animal sacrifice coincided with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. This is God's final and complete way of salvation for man, opening the new and living way to God. The veil in the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom and once again, as at the very beginning of time (before sin spoiled man's relationship with God) every human has direct access to God. And so becomes possible the priesthood of all believers who offer spiritual sacrifices to God, e.g. of their personal consecration, of souls won for Christ and of praise and thanksgiving. There is no longer any requirement for priests, who are redundant.

⁶ See Alfred Edersheim *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* p. 105.

⁷ *Op. cit. The Person of Christ Volume I: The Doctrine*, p. 44.

⁸ *Op.cit. The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 110.

⁹Others have held, in support of the idea of a perpetual virginity, that Jesus' brothers and sisters were Joseph's offspring by a former marriage, the former wife presumably having died. This strikes one as an inventive method of getting around the 'problem' of Jesus' siblings, but virtually impossible. Why should God have chosen a widower? Would there not have been a surprising age difference between Joseph and Mary had he already sired a large

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family? Why do we not read of some or all of these siblings being present at the Nativity of the Lord Jesus? Such inventions appear more as a prop to the error of Mariolatry, referred to earlier, than a serious contribution to understanding Jesus' family.