

# About the Story

Annunciation to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25)

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## Biblical Stories of Jesus' Birth

There are four Gospels recorded in the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are four different stories about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We call these Gospel stories “books” but long before they were written down they were told by a storyteller to small groups of people. Even after they were written down they were still told out loud from memory by people who knew them by heart.

About 300 years after Jesus lived, Christian leaders decided what to include as their sacred scriptures in what came to be known as the Bible. They decided it was important to include four versions of Jesus' story. The four Gospels have some stories in common, but each one also has its own distinct stories. The story of Jesus' birth is only told by Matthew and Luke. Mark and John don't have any stories about Jesus' birth at all. In those Gospels Jesus comes on the scene as a young man.

Luke tells about the story of Jesus' birth from Mary's perspective, and includes a story about angels and shepherds. Matthew tells a much shorter version of Jesus' birth from Joseph's perspective, and includes a story about wise men following a star. In Luke's Gospel the angel is named Gabriel and he announces Jesus' coming birth to Mary. She is awake and talks back to him. In Matthew's Gospel the angel is only named as “an angel of the Lord.” He appears to Joseph in a dream.

## Intimacy

The story of Jesus' birth in Matthew is an intimate story. It gives the audience inside information about Mary's engagement and her being with child “from the Holy Spirit.” It describes Joseph's internal decision and his subsequent dream. The story is about the intimate relationship between God and Joseph, between Mary and Joseph, between Joseph and Jesus. The tone of the story is one of quietness and intimacy, of interior experience, especially that of Joseph.

The overall dynamic of this story is a dynamic of crisis and then of the resolution of the tension that was created by the conception of the child in Mary as a virgin. The plot of the story is the dealing with the problem created by an unusual conception. All of the dynamics become increasingly intimate, ending with the intimacy of relationship between Joseph and Jesus.

Joseph does what the angel commanded. He takes Mary into his home as his wife, where she gives birth to a son. Joseph accepts the son as his own through the act of naming. The story ends with the climactic statement: “And he named him Jesus.” This is the shortest and therefore the slowest sentence in the whole of the story when you tell it. It is a time to hold Jesus in your arms, as Joseph did, and to gently name him. Jesus means “God saves.”

## Betrothal, Marriage, Divorce

In first-century Judean culture, young people did not decide for themselves who to marry. Their parents chose for them and negotiated financial arrangements: the girl's parents were paid for losing their daughter. The girl's father gave her a special gift of money called a dowry.

Marriage was a two-step legal process. First came engagement or "betrothal" which lasted at least a year and often several years if the girl was very young (like nine years old). Betrothal was a more serious, formal commitment than today's concept of being engaged. Vows were exchanged and fidelity (sexual faithfulness) was mandated by religious law. Breaking the law was a capital crime as spelled out in Deuteronomy 22:

If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death..."

The second step in the marriage process took place on the wedding day, when the groom took the bride into his house. In a festive procession, the groom walked with his friends from his home to the bride's home. Then everyone walked back to his house for a grand feast that sometimes lasted several days. There would be eating, drinking, singing, and dancing. At the wedding, the bride and the groom made a legal agreement and a blessing was said over them.

Men could divorce women for just about any reason, including burning the dinner or not being as beautiful as another woman. All a husband had to do was to give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away. Certainly a man could divorce his wife for sexual unfaithfulness. This would be a public scandal for the woman and cause her great shame, if not her life. Before the angel's intervention, Joseph planned to keep the law by divorcing Mary, but to do it "quietly"--probably with only two witnesses—so as not to shame her or put her life in danger.

## Fulfillment of Prophecy

The narrator informs the audience that all of this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet. The quotation is from Isaiah 7:14 who had prophesied these events hundreds of years before their fulfillment in this story. People who first heard this story would have known about Isaiah and his prophecy and been excited that it was finally going to happen. A notice about fulfillment of prophecy occurs nine times in the Gospel of Matthew.

### Sources:

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The Anchor Bible Commentary on Matthew by W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann