THE PARENTAGE OF JESUS Mt 1:18-21

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Most modern commentaries and translations tend to mislead the reader at the very outset by the title they give to the passage, Mt 1:18-25.* If it is headed 'the virginal conception of Christ' (Jerusalem), 'the conception of Jesus' (Brown) or 'the birth of Jesus Christ' (Good News Bible and most commentaries), then the reader comes to the passage with the wrong expectations. Unless he sheds these expectations he will have the impression that Matthew is an almost ludicrously incompetent story-teller. The conception of Christ takes place before the main events recorded here, and is simply mentioned as a necessary presupposition for understanding them (v. 18). Similarly, the virgin birth is the logical outcome of the story, and is therefore mentioned only in a subordinate clause in the last sentence (v. 25).

The title which Matthew himself gives to the section is 'the genesis of Jesus Christ', the very word that is used at the beginning of the genealogy (1:1) and here having very nearly the same sense. It is closer to the English word 'parentage' than 'birth'. What follows then will not be some new and unrelated story of the way Jesus came to be born, but rather an extension or explanation of the genealogy. Its point will be to explain the curious and careful wording of v. 16. After the oft-repeated formula of the preceding verses a reader would expect to hear: 'and Joseph begat Jesus'. When he is told that Joseph was 'the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born', a reader might be expected to ask, 'Well, did, or

* Bibliographical Note. The fullest exegetical and textual treatment of Mt 1:18sq is by Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah (NY, 1977). A complete theological and historical survey is contained in John McHugh, The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament (NY, 1975). Both these books contain complete bibliographies. My purpose in this article is not to duplicate, or compete with, or criticise these outstandingly learned works, but simply to present what I see as the inner consistency and consequentiality of the passage considered as a literary entity. We can discern Matthew’s theological strategy only once we are clear about his narrative tactics.
didn’t Joseph beget Jesus? If he did, why don’t you clearly say so? If he did not, how did it happen that he was the husband of Mary and that the line of succession to Jesus passes through him?’ These are the questions Matthew now sets out to answer. ‘The parentage of Jesus was like this.’

But even this observation does not fully account for the almost casual way in which the virgin conception of Christ is mentioned. To me the most natural explanation is that Matthew assumes that his readers or hearers already know about it, at least in a general way. But what they may need to be told, or be reminded of, or have explained to them, is that, despite having no physical human father, Jesus is nonetheless in the fullest legal sense Son of David and therefore rightful claimant to the royal throne of Israel. It would smack too much of paraphrase, but I do not think it would be false to the sense of the passage to translate v. 18 as follows:

You know that Mary, the betrothed wife of Joseph, was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit before they had come to live together. Well, this is what happened...

The story begins then with mention of the betrothal of Joseph and Mary.1 Betrothal, the reader is expected to understand, is very nearly as strong a mutual commitment as marriage itself. It had the force of a legal contract between the families concerned. It could however be dissolved by a declaration before two witnesses, and no explanation needed to be given. It would not have to be assumed that any sexual infidelity had taken place. A modern reader needs to remind himself that a dissolution, while having full legal authenticity, would normally be a very domestic affair. Joseph need do nothing more than go with two trusted friends to the house of Mary and declare before her parents his intention not to proceed with the wedding. Provided there were then no challenge regarding any financial readjustments, that would be the end of the matter. There was no need for the case to be brought before the synagogue. Marriage was not for the Jews a matter of church bells and registrars,

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1 In what follows I shall, for convenience, treat the story as an accurate account of actual events. If, however, Mt 1:18-21 is regarded as little more than pious fiction, then the points that I am making will carry even greater weight. If charged with implausibility, the historian can reply, ‘Well, that’s the way it was’; but a fiction-writer has to be careful that his story is psychologically coherent and credible. Fiction may certainly be as strange as fact, but, to be successful, it has to be more convincing.