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"Joseph's Dilemma"

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The many and diverse interpretations of the birth narrative of Jesus in Matthew's gospel seem to include every detail and possible variant reading except that of an honor killing. Interpreters debate the virginal conception,[1] whether or not Joseph suspected Mary of adultery,[2] the nature of divorce in first-century Palestine,[3] and what it means that Joseph was "righteous."[4]

1. For an early example of this discussion, see Taylor, *The Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth*. For a more recent text, see Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth?*.

2. This topic will be discussed in detail below. For an example of an interpreter who assumes that Joseph did not suspect Mary of adultery, see Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 31–32. For an example of an interpreter who assumes that Joseph did suspect Mary of adultery, see Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 44–45; or Tosato, "Joseph, Being a Just Man (Matt 1:19)," 547–51. For a thorough overview of this discussion, see Calkins, "The Justice of Joseph Revisited," 165–77.

3. Many interpreters offer a description of marriage and divorce in first-century Palestine. For a description of the "legal situation Matthew depicts," see Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 42–62. For a recent and thorough description of divorce in the Bible, see Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*.

4. The "righteousness" of Joseph is commonly interpreted in one of two ways. First, does Joseph's righteousness consist of his faithfulness to the law? Second, is Joseph righteous because he does not want to shame Mary? In other words, does his mercy reveal his righteousness? For a brief overview of this discussion, see Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 18; or Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 95. Please note that the Luz text has been published by

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The genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of Matthew is mined for clues.[5] The social world of the New Testament is considered.[6] Does Joseph act honorably?[7] The Greek text is translated and re-translated.[8] Some interpreters hint that the penalty for adultery was severe, or that death was threatened.[9] And yet, with so much attention given to the birth story, with so much written about Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, the very real possibility of an honor killing has not been considered. As thousands of girls and women continue to die each year in honor killings, North Atlantic biblical interpreters seem to imagine a world where such violence does not and did not exist. In this chapter, I will outline many of the modern interpretations of the birth narrative in Matthew's gospel. Further, I will examine what others consider to be Joseph's dilemma. In the end, we will find that while there is diversity in the reading of the text, there is one important shared characteristic: there is silence regarding the very real practice of honor killings.

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T. & T. Clark (Edinburgh) and in the Hermeneia commentary series (Minneapolis: Fortress). The page numbers used in this footnote and throughout this book refer to the T. & T. Clark edition (see bibliography).

5. For examples of this discussion, see Freed, "The Women in Matthew's Genealogy," 3–19; Nolland, "The Four (Five) Women and Other Annotations in Matthew's Genealogy," 527–39; or Weren, "The Five Women In Matthew's Genealogy," 288–305.

6. See Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*; Malina and Rorhbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 26–31; or Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus*, 10–12.

7. This question is addressed by Malina and Rorhbaugh in their discussion of the "righteousness" of Joseph. Malina and Rorhbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 26.

8. A comparison of translations is fascinating and often reveals a great deal about the assumptions of the translators. For example, the New Revised Standard Version translates Matt 1:19 as, "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." In contrast, Ivor H. Jones offers a translation which makes explicit his assumption that the context of Joseph's dilemma was that of divorce. According to Jones, Matt 1:19 reads "Being a man of principle, and at the same time wanting to save her from exposure, Joseph made up his mind to have the marriage contract quietly set aside." Jones, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 4. Furthermore, it is interesting that Jones uses the word, "exposure." From the context of his translation, it is impossible to discern what he means by this term. Does he me exposure to public shame? Or, does he mean exposure to death?

9. For an example, see Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 28.

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Joseph Reacts to Mary's Pregnancy[10]

The discussion of Joseph's dilemma typically begins with his awareness of and reaction to Mary's pregnancy. Three proposals are commonly identified.[11] First, it is proposed that Joseph *suspected Mary of adultery*.[12] Second, some suggest that Joseph did not suspect Mary of adultery, nor did he know anything about her miraculous conception. Rather, Joseph *suspended all judgment*.[13] Finally, it is proposed that Joseph was aware of Mary's miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit. He, in turn, *was filled with awe and feared to take Mary as his wife*.[14] While interpreters commonly choose one of the three proposals regarding Joseph's awareness of and reaction to Mary's pregnancy, it is only the first proposal that lends itself to the possible discussion of honor killings.[15] If Joseph did suspect Mary of adultery, his dilemma involved choosing between the options of punishment for such an act. However, if Joseph suspended judgment or was aware that Mary's pregnancy was miraculous in nature, the discussion of an honor killing would seem absurd. Therefore, my thesis, that the context of the birth narrative in

10. For a summary of Joseph's reaction to Mary's pregnancy in the Gospel of Matthew, the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, the *Gospel of the Birth of Mary*, and the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, see Elliot, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives*, 43–44.

11. While the majority of interpreters envision three primary proposals for Joseph's awareness of and reaction to Mary's pregnancy, other proposals are offered. For example, G. E. P. Cox concludes that it does not matter whether Mary had committed adultery or not, Joseph must divorce her. He explains, "We need not too lightly assume that Joseph was convinced of Mary's guilt, which is the usual interpretation of his bewilderment. But whether she was an adulteress or a chosen vessel of God, she was no longer to be his, and as a 'righteous man' (R.V.) he was resolved upon privately giving her a deed of cancellation." Cox, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 29.

12. For an example, see Davies, *Matthew*, 32. "Readers infer that Joseph regarded Mary's pregnancy as evidence of her union with another man, and his quiet release of her from the betrothal would have left her free to marry her child's father."

13. For a succinct summary of this position, see Calkins, "The Justice of Joseph Revisited," 169–71.

14. Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 31–32. See also, Calkins, "The Justice of Joseph Revisited," 165–77.

15. The denominational affiliation of the interpreter often dictates which proposal is supported. For example, while most Protestants assume the first proposal (that Joseph suspected Mary of adultery), Roman Catholics tend to support the second or, more commonly, the third. Roman Catholic, Raymond Brown, is a notable exception (see Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 122–28).

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Matthew is that of a possible honor killing, depends upon Joseph suspecting Mary of adultery.

In 1936, F. W. Green boldly declared that, "all modern commentators are agreed, the words [of Matthew 1:19] clearly mean that Joseph believed from the beginning in Mary's innocence."[16] In 1975, Herman Hendrickx echoed Green. He noted that, "most modern commentators do not accept the view that Joseph suspected Mary."[17] While the confidence of Green and Hendrickx is unquestionable, their conclusion is not. In fact, that Joseph suspected Mary of adultery is clearly the majority opinion for modern interpreters. Jane Schaberg offers a powerful description and defense of this position.[18]

> The logic and structure of the story are violated if we assume with some critics that before the encounter with the angel Joseph knew that the pregnancy was "through the Holy Spirit." This theory requires the reader to guess blindly at the source of Joseph's information, and to presume that "religious awe" would lead him to decide on divorce. It also makes redundant, anticlimactic, and nonrevelatory the angel's words to him at the end of v 20: "what is begotten in her is through the Holy Spirit." It is better to understand the first mention of the Spirit in v 18 as an explanation Matthew addresses to the reader, which is "not part of the narrative flow." Matthew wants the reader at this point to know more than Joseph does.[19]

Here, Schaberg convincingly argues that the text of Matthew reveals Joseph's assumption of the adultery of Mary.

It is not, however, only modern interpreters who hold this view. Arthur Burton Calkins explains that, "We also find the hypothesis of adultery held most probably even prior to the *Protoevangelium of James*[20] by St. Justin Martyr (ca. 165) in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. This position was also given most powerful backing in the preaching of two of the great Western Fathers of the Church, St. Ambrose (339–397) and St. Augustine (354–430) and by

16. F. W. Green, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, 104.

17. Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 31.

18. It seems that Schaberg is deeply indebted to the interpretation of Raymond Brown. See Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 122–28.

19. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 44–45.

20. This important text, more commonly titled the *Protevangelium of James*, will receive significant attention in chapter 3.

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probably the greatest father of the East, St. John Chrysostom (354–407)."[21] Calkins further notes that an ancient Greek hymn also supports this position. He explains, "The Akathistos Hymn of the Greek Church dating from the late fifth or early sixth century in its third kontakion also accepts the hypothesis that Joseph suspected adultery."[22]

Why have so many early readers of Matthew, together with most modern readers, concluded that Joseph suspected Mary of adultery? Quite simply, the narrative flow of the text requires the reader to come to this conclusion. In v. 18, readers are provided with information that is not known to Joseph. Mary is with child—through the Holy Spirit. Raymond Brown explains, "Matthew wants the reader to know more than do the characters in the story, so that the reader will not entertain for a moment the suspicion that grows in Joseph's mind."[23] While we, as readers, do not face a dilemma, it is clear from the text that Joseph does. The dilemma continues until an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream (vv. 20–21). Since the text itself makes real the dilemma faced by Joseph, we too must closely consider this dilemma.

Returning to the conclusions of Jane Schaberg, she correctly identifies that, "Adultery or rape are two normal alternatives Joseph had for explaining the pregnancy with which he was confronted."[24] Further, Schaberg adds that, "two alternative actions were considered by him: to expose Mary to public shame or to divorce her secretly—the action he chose."[25] In the end, while Schaberg does correctly identify the context of Joseph's dilemma, the possibility of an honor killing is never considered.

21. Calkins, "The Justice of Joseph Revisited," 166–67. It is important to note that although Calkins offers a thorough and helpful description of the history of the "hypothesis of adultery," he concludes, with many other Roman Catholic interpreters, that Joseph experienced "reverential fear." Calkins, "The Justice of Joseph Revisited," 171–77.

22. Ibid., 167.

23. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 124.

24. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 45. Schaberg is not alone in her argument that Joseph might have suspected that Mary was raped. For another example, see Buchanan, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 73. Buchanan notes, "Joseph might have considered Mary to be a suspected adulteress and have taken her to the priest and had her tested for faithfulness (Numbers 5), but he did not. The mythologist presented Joseph as one who probably thought Mary had been innocently raped and chose not to embarrass her further, but instead to divorce her quietly."

25. Ibid., 45.

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What Were Joseph's Options?

The central question facing readers of Matt 1:19 is simple, "If Joseph suspected Mary of adultery, what were his options?" The text indicates that Joseph is confronted with the pregnancy of Mary (and makes clear his subsequent assumption of adultery, for they have not yet begun to live together and he has not yet been told that Mary is with child through the Holy Spirit). This is, of course, the context of Joseph's dilemma. The dilemma itself is the choice between different and rival options. In other words, what options does a "righteous" man have when he is confronted with the adultery of his wife? While all interpreters seem to agree that divorce was an option, there is surprisingly little discussion or consideration of other, rival options.[26] The question that dominates the discussion of Matt 1:19 is whether or not Joseph ought to make his divorce of Mary public or private? The stoning of Mary is commonly viewed as either anachronistic or is dismissed as shameful. The consideration that a formal court appearance was an option is also often dismissed in favor of the option of a private divorce. And the possibility of an honor killing has not been considered. In short, it is the threatened honor of *Mary* that seems to inform the interpretation of Matt 1:19.

That divorce was an option for Joseph is beyond dispute. In fact, not only do most (if not all) interpreters assume that divorce was an option, many write as if it was the only option. The dilemma, then, is the choice between a "public" or "private" divorce. A public divorce, it is believed would bring shame upon Mary. A private divorce would minimize her disgrace. Floyd V. Filson offers an example of such a reading:

> Since betrothal was legally binding, Joseph is called **her husband** (vs. 19) and Mary **your wife** and **his wife** (vss. 20, 24). To break the bond Joseph would have to divorce her. He thought that Mary had violated the marriage tie by sinful relations with another man. In his uprightness he thought divorce necessary, but with a kindly concern to cause Mary a minimum of shame and public disgrace he **decided to divorce her secretly**, with the minimum number of legal witnesses (two, in rabbinical sources).[27]

26. There are interpretations that do not seem to envision rival options or do not explicitly mention divorce. For example, Charles Erdman offers a short commentary on the birth of Jesus. With regard to Matt 1:19, he simply notes that, "the mother of Jesus is about to be repudiated . . ." Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 25.

27. Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 54. See also Fenton, *Saint Matthew*, 43; Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 21; Hare, *Matthew*, 9; Keener, *A*

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For Filson, that Joseph will divorce Mary is without question. And, without any other options provided, the dilemma involves only the public/private nature of the divorce. It is important to note that he does not envision the killing of Mary as an option. Furthermore, when he does mention "shame," Joseph's actions are motivated by minimizing the shame of Mary and not, as we would expect, the defense of *his* honor.

R. T. France echoes Filson's conclusion that Joseph would divorce Mary. However, France does include another option that he writes off as anachronistic. France notes that while Deuteronomy prescribes the punishment of stoning for those that have committed adultery, he asserts that this practice was no longer in use at the turn of the first-century.

> In Old Testament law the penalty for unchastity before marriage was stoning (Dt. 22:13–21), but by this time divorce, based on Deuteronomy 24:1, was the rule . . . Joseph, as *a just* (*i.e.* law-abiding) *man*, could, and perhaps should, have done so by accusation of adultery resulting in a public trail, but his unwillingness to *put her to shame* . . . led him to consider the permitted alternative of private divorce before two witnesses.[28]

France was not the first, nor the last to claim that stoning was no longer practiced in the first century. Francis Wright Beare boldly declares that, "There is no evidence that this penalty was imposed at the time of the Gospel, but a public repudiation would certainly bring lasting shame upon the woman."[29] Ironically, neither France nor Beare provide any evidence that stoning did *not* occur in the first century. Not only is there a complete lack of evidence to support their claim, but neither interpreter attempts to explain the related story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). Finally, it is again the interplay between the honor of Mary and the public/private nature of divorce which is perceived to be Joseph's dilemma.

Similarly, Ulrich Luz notes that, "According to Deut 22:23f., stoning was obligatory punishment for the adultery of betrothed persons. However, it was no longer practiced at that time."[30] What makes Luz's comment so important is that he *does* attempt to offer evidence. Luz refers to a 1922

Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 90–91; and Witherington, *Women in the Early* Church, 166–69.

28. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 77.

29. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 68.

30. Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 119.

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text by Hermann Leberecht Strack and Paul Billerbeck.[31] Unfortunately, Strack and Billerbeck do not claim that stoning was no longer practiced in the first century. In fact, the opposite claim is made. In their commentary on Matt 1:19 in light of the Mishnah and Talmud, Strack and Billerbeck explain that it was not permitted to kill a *minor* if she committed adultery. However, they further note, that a girl who has committed adultery and is at least 12 years, 6 months, and 1 day old, may be killed by either stoning or strangulation. In other words, the evidence that Luz does provide in no way claims that stoning was no longer practiced in the first century.[32] Robert H. Gundry repeats the claim made by Luz, noting that, "Because he wanted to keep the Mosiac law, Joseph considered himself obligated at least to divorce Mary (Deut 22:23–24). Some rabbinic evidence suggests relaxation of the prescribed stoning . . ."[33] Again following the lead of Luz, Gundry refers to the work of Strack and Billerbeck. The point cannot be made strongly enough, Strack and Billerbeck do not state in any way that stoning was no longer practiced in the first century. What is most troublesome about the interpretations of Luz and Gundry is not their misrepresentation of Strack and Billerbeck, it is their apparent lack of awareness of the very real ancient and continuing threat to women and girls who are thought to have shamed their families.

Another scenario for Joseph's dilemma involves the choice between divorcing Mary and bringing her before a court of law to be tried and sentenced. Arthur Carr offers an early example of this position. He writes, "But two courses were open to him. He could either summon her before the law-courts to be judicially condemned and punished, or he could put her away by a bill of divorcement before witnesses, but without assigning cause."[34] While Carr mentions "punishment," he offers no description of what this might be. We might presume that he is referring to the proscribed stoning of Deut 22:23–24, but this is never made explicit. Furthermore, the assumption that Joseph will divorce Mary is again emphasized. Finally, Carr's conclusion that Joseph does not need to "assign cause" seems to reinforce the idea that the honor of Mary is at stake.

31. Luz cites pages 50–53 in the first volume of a six volume set entitled, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Str-B 1.50–53).

32. Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 1.50–53.

33. Gundry, *Matthew*, 21.

34. Carr, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, 83.

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Some interpreters do not dismiss the punishment of death as anachronistic. However, divorce is described as being the less "shameful" of the forms of punishment. In 1996, Warren Carter noted, "Deuteronomic law allowed death for intercourse with a betrothed woman (Deut 22:23–27). Joseph, not aware of the Spirit's role and assuming Mary to be pregnant by another man, decides not to put her to death but to exercise a less shameful action of divorcing her quietly."[35] Again, it is the honor of Mary that seems to be threatened and not the honor of her family. Furthermore, it is the act of killing that is described as being "shameful," not the adultery itself. Ironically, Warren Carter interpreted Matt 1:19 four years later and made no mention of the possibility of the death of Mary. He explained that, "In Joseph's view, Mary has dishonored him by violating the betrothal agreement. Divorce is the only option (cf. Deut 22:20–27). But righteousness or justice is not separated from mercy, so *not wishing to expose her to public disgrace*, Joseph prefers a quiet divorce."[36] In his 2000 reading of Matt 1:19, Carter boldly proclaims that divorce is the "only option." In doing so, he returns to the public/private divorce option explored earlier by Filson. Carter also associates a public divorce with the undesirable shaming of Mary.

Similarly, Daniel J. Harrington takes seriously the option of stoning. "The . . . term [righteous] is best interpreted with reference to Joseph's observance of the Law . . . The particular law that concerned Mary and Joseph appears in Deut 22:23–27, the case of an engaged woman found not to be a virgin. She was to be returned to her father's house and stoned to death by the men of the city on account of the disgrace brought upon her father's house."[37] Harrington continues, however, by returning to the now common theme of the honor of Mary. He notes that, "Joseph decided to spare Mary this public disgrace by simply putting her through the less public procedure of divorce . . ."[38] For Harrington, and countless others, the choices available to Joseph are evaluated in terms of their threat to the honor of Mary.

In light of the modern practice of honor killings, Joseph's options as envisioned by biblical interpreters seem quite problematic. On one hand, many interpreters seem to envision a world that is free from the violent killing of women. On the other hand, those that do entertain the possible

35. Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, 124.

36. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 68.

37. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 34.

38. Ibid., 34–35.

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killing of Mary seem to misunderstand the dynamics of family honor and adultery in the ancient and modern Mediterranean world. Time and time again it is stated that a quiet divorce is the less shameful action and that Joseph would have been motivated to preserve the honor of Mary. Such readings are in direct opposition to the known practice of honor killings. Alessandra Antonelli, writing in the *Palestine Report*, reminds us, "Adultery has different meanings and consequences for men and women. The man has the 'right' to kill his wife and 'cleanse' his honor."[39] Antonelli continues by quoting Suad Abu Daya of the [Palestinian] Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling. Abu Daya explains that, "All the burden, even in cases of rape, is on the woman. She is the one who bears the consequences in any case, even by paying with her own life."[40]

It may seem shocking or scandalous to envision an honor killing as one of Joseph's options. However, in the following chapters I will argue that this is indeed the context that was assumed by early Christ-followers. Furthermore, the very real threat of an honor killing sets the narrative stage for Matthew's recurring theme that *from expected death comes unexpected new life*. Readers may wish to interpret Matt 1:19 in light of the threatened honor of Mary, but this does not reflect the reality of the punishment for adultery in the ancient world of Palestine or acknowledge the radical theme of "new life" in Matthew's gospel.

Studies on the Infancy Narratives[41]

For thirty years, Raymond E. Brown's classic text, *The Birth of the Messiah*, has served as the bedrock upon which modern biblical interpreters have built their understanding of the birth of Jesus. While interpreters have long been interested in the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, it is Brown's text that has become essential reading. Furthermore, Brown has both built upon and inspired many articles, chapters, and books which seek to explain the context and meaning of the birth of Jesus. In this section, I will

39. Antonelli, "Crimes not Stories," 16.

40. Ibid.

41. A wide variety of focused studies have been written concerning the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke. Surprisingly, many do not address Joseph's dilemma. For an example, see Stendahl, "*Quis et Unde?*" 56–66.

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explore Brown's commentary and four other contributions to the discussion of the birth narratives. As in the previous section, a single question will guide our inquiry. "What were Joseph's options?" More specifically, do these focused studies of the infancy narratives consider the possibility of an honor killing?

As noted above, Brown argues that Joseph suspected Mary of adultery. Readers of Matthew are told that Mary is pregnant through the Holy Spirit, but this information is only later revealed to Joseph.[42] In the meantime, he must decide what to do. According to Brown, Joseph is unwilling to "expose her to public disgrace." Unfortunately, Brown does not explain this public act. He does note that this is a "public display," but he fails to give any specific explanation of the shaming act.[43] Brown does, however, explain that Joseph intends to divorce Mary quietly. While a totally secret divorce is not possible ("since the writ of repudiation had to be delivered before two witnesses"),[44] Brown does understand the narrative to imply that Joseph will divorce Mary "leniently."[45] In other words, Joseph will not accuse Mary publicly of adultery and thus not subject her to a trial.[46]

So what options does Brown envision for Joseph? He clearly explains that Joseph suspects Mary of adultery. But, his explanation of Joseph's options is much less clear. For example, readers are never told what it means that Joseph is unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace. In the end, Brown follows in the familiar footsteps of countless other interpreters. He describes a "quiet divorce," but does not give any substantive explanation of other options. Furthermore, Brown does not include a discussion of the possible stoning of Mary, nor does he include the possibility of an honor killing.[47]

Jean Daniélou offered an alternate reading of the birth stories in his text, *The Infancy Narratives*. Here, he addressed the topic of the virgin conception, Jesus' descent from David, and the prophecy of the Emmanuel.

42. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 124.

43. Ibid., 128.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Brown does add the following condition in reference to a trial: "If Num 5;11–31 was still effective in NT times, a trial by ordeal was the procedure when there was no witnesses to the adultery" (Ibid., 128).

47. For a helpful critique of Brown, see Bourke, review of *The Birth of the Messiah*, 120–24. Here, Bourke notes that, "The very existence in the first century of the Christian era of a 'less severe legal system' in which divorce rather than death was the required punishment is purely speculative . . ." Bourke, review of *The Birth of the Messiah*, 121.

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Important for this study, Daniélou argues that Joseph did not suspect Mary of adultery. With this reading, there is no dilemma regarding what Joseph ought to do with his (presumed) adulterous wife. Rather, Joseph chooses to divorce Mary so that she is free to walk this "mysterious path" along which God was leading her.

> The story first shows [Joseph's] relationship with Mary, a relationship which has several successive stages. First, we have the betrothal of Joseph and Mary, and here Matthew confirms what we are told by Luke. Then, Joseph's attitude to Mary when he hears from her what God has revealed to her and what has taken place. Mary has become the instrument of God's mysterious plan, and thereby her feet are set on a very different path from anything he had expected. There is no question of his condemning her publicly, which he would have done if he were carrying out the Law which permitted the breaking-off of an engagement if the woman were unfaithful. Even if it were not for that reason, any official breaking-off would have cast an undeserved shadow of guilt on Mary. The only solution, then, was to leave her totally free to enter upon the mysterious path along which God was leading her.[48]

In this reading of the infancy narratives, Joseph does not suspect Mary of adultery and, therefore, the punishment of death is never mentioned. Similarly, Herman Hendrickx in his book, *Infancy Narratives*, does not address Joseph's dilemma. Like Daniélou, Hendrickx, argues that Joseph did not suspect Mary of adultery. It is not surprising, then, that Hendrickx does not discuss the possible options for punishment.[49]

R. T. France, in his text, "Scripture, Tradition, and History in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew," raises an important question, "But are these events credible in the real world of the first-century Palestine? Do they ring true?"[50] In other words, France encourages readers to consider the social context of the birth narratives. He wishes for readers to consider whether or not the stories reflect the real lives of first-century Mediterranean men and women. After considering both Joseph's dream and response and the flight to Egypt, France concludes that, "Joseph and his experiences ring true in the south-east Mediterranean world of the turn of the era, and the

48. Daniélou, *The Infancy Narratives*, 43

49. Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 28–36.

50. France, "Scripture, Tradition, and History in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew," 255.

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distinctive focus of these stories accords well with an origin in Joseph's own reminiscences."[51] Surprisingly, for a biblical interpreter interested in the social context of the birth stories, France never addresses Joseph's dilemma. Furthermore, he does not discuss either divorce or honor killings. So, while France urges his readers to consider the "real-world" context of the birth narratives, he himself is quite limited in his reading of the text.

Finally, René Laurentin, in his book, *The Truth of Christmas*, notes that Joseph was aware that Mary was pregnant and that the child belonged to God alone. Therefore, Joseph does not have a dilemma, for he knows that what has happened was the work of God. Joseph, in turn, "withdrew" so that Mary would not be placed in an awkward situation.

> This account by Matthew contains no hint of any suspicion on Joseph's part. His decision is explained by the fact that "he was a just man." If he had considered his wife to be guilty, justice would have demanded that he apply the Law to her; the Law, however, acknowledged no private proceedings but only an official writ of divorce (Dt 24:1). What Joseph knew, according to Matthew 1:18, is that this child belonged to God alone. Justice required that he not seek to make his own either the holy offspring that was not his or this wife who belonged to God. He therefore withdrew quietly to avoid putting Mary in an awkward situation. He left the resolution to God, the author of the event. The account gives no further details, as they are of no importance to the meaning.[52]

In short, Laurentin does not have to explain Joseph's dilemma, for Joseph does not suspect Mary of adultery. Since her pregnancy is always known to be the work of God, Joseph is not faced with a decision regarding adultery.

While the previous section explored Joseph's possible options as envisioned by a variety of biblical interpreters, each interpreter based their reading upon the assumption that Joseph suspected Mary of adultery. In sharp contrast, three of the five works outlined in this section are built around the assumption that Joseph did not suspect Mary of adultery. Because of this assumption, the possible punishment for adultery is not considered. While Raymond Brown does assume that Joseph suspects Mary of adultery, his discussion of her punishment is limited. Brown concludes rather vaguely that Joseph will divorce Mary leniently. Surprisingly, R. T. France does not

51. Ibid., 275.

52. Laurentin, *The Truth of Christmas*, 266.

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even address Joseph's dilemma. In short, the readings of the infancy narratives outlined in this section either do not envision a dilemma for Joseph or do not offer a detailed description of Joseph's options. It is not surprising, then, that none consider the possibility of an honor killing.

Joseph's Dilemma and Social Scientific Interpretation

Biblical interpreters interested in the social world of the New Testament have raised the question of honor and the pregnancy of Mary.[53] Unfortunately, the relationship between honor and adultery continues to raise important questions. For social-scientific critics, it is again the honor of *Mary* that remains the focus. In other words, does Joseph offer a private divorce to defend *her* honor? As we have seen in the first chapter, it is *family* honor that is at risk. It seems, then, that the most appropriate option available to Joseph is that which defends the honor of the family, not the honor of Mary.

Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh in their text, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, explain that, "virginity was the *sine qua non* for an honorable marriage. A woman without it would have shamed her entire paternal family."[54] While Malina and Rohrbaugh do identify the importance of virginity and family honor, they go on to define the dilemma of Joseph in terms of divorce and explain that a quiet divorce was offered so that he would not bring shame upon Mary.

> [Matt 1:19] . . . explains two things: why Joseph "planned to dismiss her" and to dismiss (divorce) her "quietly." The reason behind the first feature is that Joseph was a "righteous man," that is, a person who knew how to behave honorably in interpersonal relationships. Since the child Mary was carrying was not his, he would not usurp the right of another by taking it. By divorcing Mary, Joseph offered the real father of Jesus the opportunity of retrieving his child by marrying the mother. Moreover, he would carry out this divorce "quietly" because he was not willing to shame Mary. Clearly such

53. It is striking, however, that many social-scientific critics do not raise the issue of honor and the pregnancy of Mary. For example, Richard A. Horsely, in his text which examines the birth narratives, *The Liberation of Christmas*, does not deal with Joseph's dilemma. See Horsely, *The Liberation of Christmas*. Again, Jerome Neyrey in his text exploring honor and shame in the Gospel of Matthew does not deal with the issue of honor and shame and the pregnancy of Mary. See Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in Matthew*.

54. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 26.

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> a motive indicates a decent and honorable person. To shame a female is to bring dishonor on her (and her family) by making a public verifiable accusation of unworthy behavior. For postmenarchic and premenopausal females, unworthy behavior is largely if not exclusively related to gender-based roles and sexual functions.[55]

In short, Malina and Rohrbaugh helpfully integrate the discussion of honor and shame into their interpretation of Matt 1:19. However, an important question remains: Why don't they consider whether or not the possibility of an honor killing acts as the broad cultural context for the interpretation of this verse?

That Malina and Rohrbaugh do not interpret Matt 1:19 in light of an honor killing is even more surprising when compared with Malina's discussion of honor and shame in his text, *Windows on the World of Jesus: Time Travel in Ancient Judea*.[56] Here, he explains that it is the oldest son's duty to restore the honor of the father in cases where a daughter dishonors her father and family.[57] In some cases, this involves the killing of the offending member of the family. Malina explains that the daughter "is considered as always bound, tied, connected with the father and the family. Her main concern is to act in a way that mirrors the values, concerns, and honor of her father and family."[58] When her actions are not mirror images of the family's values, she is dismissing his authority and the community will quickly deny the father's claim to social standing. In this case, the oldest son is responsible for restoring the family honor. Malina follows this discussion with many examples of the Bible's concern for "redemption," yet he never mentions the pregnancy of Mary. In short, Malina and Rohrbaugh helpfully describe the relationship between the virginity of women and family honor. Furthermore, they explain that when girls or women are believed to have shamed the family through inappropriate sexual behavior, it was the role of the oldest son to restore the family honor. Why, then, do they stop short of integrating this model of behavior into their reading of Matthew 1:19?

Similarly, John Pilch interprets Matt 1:19 in terms of Mary's honor. While he does mention the possible death of Mary, it is still the defense of

55. Ibid.

56. Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus*, 1–19.

57. Malina provides helpful descriptions of Mediterranean cultural values by offering short fictional accounts followed by a detailed explanation. In this case, Malina uses the example of a woman eloping with her boyfriend. See ibid., 5–7.

58. Ibid., 5.

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her honor that is the reason for a quiet divorce. Pilch, in his interpretation of "Joseph's predicament," notes three ways in which the values of honor and shame inform Matt 1:19. To begin, Pilch offers an interpretation very similar to that of Malina and Rohrbaugh. He notes that, "the honor code of the Mediterranean world demands that no one take what properly belongs to another. Mary's child is not Joseph's, so he hesitates to take it."[59] Next, Pilch notes that Joseph ". . . also knows that he will be unable to display publicly the 'tokens of virginity' (Deut 22:13–21) on his wedding night. If he doesn't act quickly, he will be shamed."[60] Finally, Pilch does note the possibility that Mary would be killed.

> By law, Joseph is entitled to return Mary to her father and expose her to death. Numbers 5:11–31 describes the ordeal Mary would have to undergo. But Joseph is an honorable man and determines to divorce her leniently. His sense of honor hopes that the rightful father will seize this opportunity to claim the child and marry Mary. In all his decision, Joseph acts very honorably.[61]

Pilch, like Malina and Rohrbaugh before him, describes the relationship between honor and adultery in the ancient Palestinian world. However, again like Malina and Rorhbaugh, he does not seem to consider that an honor killing (and the defense of *family* honor) is the most appropriate context in which to read the birth narrative in Matthew.

This book is deeply indebted to the work of Malina, Rorhbaugh, and Pilch. Without their foundational descriptions of honor and shame, I quite likely would not have considered an honor killing as the appropriate context for reading Matt 1:19. However, it is important to ask whether or not their interpretation of the relationship between honor and shame with the birth narrative in Matthew is the only (or even most appropriate) reading. Suzanne Ruggi, a staff reporter for *The Jerusalem Times*, repeatedly stresses the corporate nature of family honor and its dependence on the virginity of its unmarried female members. Stated simply, "a woman's virginity is the property of the men around her . . ."[62] When this virginity is lost, the honor of the family (and importantly, of the men) is in jeopardy. The result

59. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus*, 11.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ruggi, "Honor Killing in Palestine," 13.

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is simple. It is the honor of the father and the family that must be defended, not that of the offending daughter.

Conclusion

The discussion of Joseph's dilemma begins with the question of his awareness of and reaction to Mary's pregnancy. The majority of modern biblical interpreters assume that Joseph suspected Mary of adultery. Furthermore, the interpreters focus their attention on the divorce of Mary. Will this divorce be public or private? It is the conclusion of most that the context of the birth narrative in Matthew's gospel is that of a private, quite, lenient divorce. Importantly, protecting the honor of Mary is the most common reason given for such a divorce. In other words, it is the honor of Mary that plays a central role in the interpretation of Matthew's birth narrative. Unfortunately, such a reading seems quite unlikely when considering the reality of honor killings. In the situation of adultery, it is the honor of the threatened family that is in jeopardy, not that of the offending girl. In cases both ancient and modern, it is the family honor that must be defended, even to the point of death.

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