Introduction

Stories of the reality and brutality of honor killings come from many sources. Newspapers and magazines around the world tell of the killing of women by shamed family members, killings meant to restore family honor.[1] A wide variety of books explore the lives of women who live with the reality of such violence.[2] Documentary films offer a personal glimpse into the lives of men and women affected by the crime.[3] And when we listen closely, the words of musicians, artists, and poets tell the story of women wiped out in blood. Nazik al-Malaika, an Iraqi feminist poet, tells the story of murder in the name of family honor.

> Dawn will come and the girls will ask about her,
> Where is she? And the monster will answer:
> "We killed her."
> A mark of shame was on our forehead and we washed it off.
>
> Her black tale will be told by neighbours,
> And will be told in the quarter even by the palm trees,
> Even the wooden doors will not forget her,
> It will be whispered even by the stones.
> Washing off the shame . . . Washing off the shame.
> O neighbours, O village girls,
> Bread we shall knead with our tears.

1. Many examples will be provided in chapter 1. However, for a helpful introduction, see Ruggi, "Honor Killing in Palestine," 12–15.

2. For an example that follows the lives of women in Iraq from birth to old age, see al-Khayyat, *Honour and Shame*.

3. For two recent examples, see *In the Morning* and *Love, Honor, & Disobey*.

We'll shear our plaits and skin our hands,
To keep their clothes white and pure,
No smile, no joy, no turn as the knife so waiting
For us in the hand of father or brother
And tomorrow, who knows which desert
Swallows us, to wash off shame?[4]

It is in this context, the context of honor killings, the context of family honor and family shame that we must hear the birth narrative in Matthew. The story is told in eight verses and embedded in this short account is "Joseph's dilemma." Listeners are told that, "When Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (1:18). What happens next has long been debated. We are made to assume that Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant, but not that she is with child from the Holy Spirit. This information is made known to Joseph later by an angel of the Lord who appeared to him in a dream. In the meantime, Joseph must decide what he will do with Mary.

We are told that "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly" (1:19). The discussion of this verse generally focuses on two questions. First, did Joseph suspect Mary of adultery? Second, if he did suspect Mary of adultery, what where his options? While there is some diversity in the way these questions are answered, the majority of modern interpreters envision only one option—that of divorce. The dilemma, then, is whether Joseph will divorce Mary "publicly" or "privately." While this discussion reflects the view of the majority, it does not adequately address Joseph's dilemma. In this book, I will argue that early Christ-followers understood Joseph's dilemma to involve an assumption of adultery and the subsequent possibility of killing Mary. Worded differently, Joseph's dilemma involves the possibility of an honor killing. If Joseph reveals that Mary is pregnant she might be killed. If Joseph conceals Mary's pregnancy, he will be opposing the law of the Lord. What is a "righteous" man to do?

For some, this thesis may be difficult to accept. In fact, it may sound heretical to argue that Joseph's dilemma involves the possible murder of Mary (and, therefore, the killing of Jesus). I will argue, however, that this reading actually introduces an important Matthean theme—*from expected*

4. al-Khayyat, *Honour and Shame*, 35–36. This poem was originally written in Arabic and was translated into English by al-Khayyat. The original Arabic citation is from al-Malaika, *A Tranquil Moment of a Wave*.

death comes unexpected new life. This theme runs throughout the gospel and culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, while the majority of this book will focus on a single story, the interpretation of Joseph's dilemma will inform my reading of Matthew as a whole.

The structure for this work is quite simple. I will begin by providing a thorough description of modern honor killings. While the consideration of the cultural values of honor and shame has become commonplace in the study of the New Testament world, I am not aware of a single, detailed analysis of honor killings by a biblical interpreter.[5] In fact, many (perhaps most) biblical interpreters do not discuss the possible killing of Mary.[6] For those that do acknowledge that the "law commands severe penalties," the killing of Mary is only hinted at and the reality of an honor killing is left unaddressed. Robert H. Smith provides a helpful example of the vague nature of such an interpretation of Matt 1:19:

> The Law commanded severe penalties for sexual sins (Deut. 22:13-27). Matthew does not indulge in speculation about the hurt feelings of Joseph or tortured disclaimers of Mary but focuses entirely on the character of Joseph as **a just man** (*dikaios*, cf. 13:43, 49; 25:37, 46; 27:4, 19, 24), a man of righteousness, a quality lifted up and celebrated in the Gospel more than in any of the others . . . As a man of righteousness, Joseph planned to follow the old law and put Mary aside. But mercy struggled in Joseph with his sense of right, and he resolved to divorce her **quietly** without exposing her to public shame.[7]

While Smith notes that the "law commanded severe penalties for sexual sins," he does not make explicit the nature of the penalties. This vague interpretation of Matt 1:19 is further complicated as he juxtaposes "putting Mary aside" with "divorcing her quietly." Quite simply, it is not clear what

5. A search of New Testament Abstracts does not reveal a single use of the term, "honor killing." Furthermore, a search of the ATLA Religion Database does not reveal a single use of the term by a biblical interpreter. In short, biblical interpreters do not appear to have considered the possibility that an honor killing serves as the context for Matthew's birth narrative.

6. In chapter 2, I will provide a detailed examination of various interpretations of Matt 1:19. For an example of an interpretation that considers the cultural values of honor and shame, but lacks a discussion of honor killings, see Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 26.

7. Smith, *Matthew*, 35–36.

Smith is alluding to in his description of Joseph's dilemma. It is clear, however, that he does not include a discussion of honor killings.

There are likely many reasons for vagueness—even silence—when discussing Joseph's dilemma. The reason most often implied in North Atlantic biblical interpretation is lack of awareness of the *reality* of honor killings. A small number of interpreters mention the threat of death for Mary. Unfortunately, it is commonly viewed as *only a threat*. For many, it is believed that honor killings "never really occurred."[8] For this reason, I will begin by outlining the modern practice of honor killings. If we become aware of this very real violent crime, new questions will necessarily arise. If this practice occurs today, did it occur in the first century? If so, how might early Christ-followers have understood the birth story in Matthew's gospel? How might this inform our reading of the text?

After my description of modern honor killings, I will outline various modern interpretations of the birth story in Matthew. Two topics will dominate this discussion. Did Joseph suspect Mary of adultery? If so, what were Joseph's options for punishment? It is here that we are made aware of the silence regarding honor killings. Joseph's dilemma is acknowledged, but the descriptions of his options for punishment reveal two fundamental problems. First, modern biblical interpreters emphasize the need to defend the honor of Mary, rather than the honor of the family. Second, interpreters commonly envision only one option for punishment, that of divorce.

Did honor killings actually occur in the New Testament world? This question is the single focus of chapter 3. After examining a wide body of evidence, a positive answer to the question emerges. However, we will find that just as modern honor killings are often kept silent, the same was true in the first century. While not speaking of adultery, Josephus reveals in vivid detail the relationship between silence and sexual violence. He explains that as the Judean delegates recalled Herod's misrule, they told of the rape and subsequent silence that often accompanied the collecting of taxes:

8. The belief that honor killings did not occur in the first century is common and will be discussed in detail in the second chapter. For an example, see Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 68. Beare writes, "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." Similarly, Ulrich Luz writes, "According to Deut 22:23–24 the punishment required for adultery in the case of betrothed persons is stoning. Admittedly, it was no longer practiced in that day." Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 94.

> In addition to the collecting of the tribute that was imposed on everyone each year, lavish extra contributions had to be made to [Herod] and his household and friends and those of his slaves who were sent out to collect the tribute because there was no immunity at all from outrage unless bribes were paid. Moreover, about the corrupting of their virgin daughters, and the debauching of their wives, victims of drunken violence and bestiality, they were silent only because those who suffer such indignities are just as pleased to have them remain undisclosed as they are not to have had them happen at all.[9]

In short, while there is evidence of honor killings in the New Testament world, it seems clear that the stories of many victims were never written down or passed along.

After concluding that honor killings did occur in the first century and that Joseph's dilemma involved the possible honor killing of Mary, I will argue that this theme establishes a narrative pattern that is visible throughout the gospel. The author of Matthew continually emphasizes that from expected death comes unexpected new life. Jesus might have been killed before he was even born, but the unexpected occurred and new life emerged. Jesus might have been killed before his second birthday, but through the flight to Egypt, new life emerged. This pattern continues throughout the life of Jesus. Furthermore, while both examples above are literal movements from expected death to unexpected new life, the author of Matthew also presents this theme as a metaphor. Finally, Matthew emphasizes that this pattern is replicated time and time again in the lives of Jesus' followers. There is, then, good news embedded in Joseph's dilemma.

Before I begin, it is essential to acknowledge an important warning regarding the discussion of honor killings. Instructors of Middle East Studies commonly emphasize a tendency among many Western (or North Atlantic) individuals: whether intentional or not, the discussion of honor killings is often neocolonialist in nature. An examination of what "they" do may have the effect of perpetuating the stereotype that Middle Eastern societies are/were "backwards." Furthermore, such representations may perpetuate "first-world/third-world" hierarchies. In this book, I will attempt to join a host of Middle Eastern voices and write against the grain of such neocolonialist tendencies.

9. Josephus, *Ant*. 17.308–9.

In her discussion of honor killings, Nadine Naber explains ". . . teaching against the grain of neocolonialist first-world/third-world hierarchies has become a central component of Middle East Studies . . . ."[10] While there are various ways to write against the grain of neocolonialism, many anthropologists seek to contextualize the issue of honor killings in terms of human rights. In other words, honor killings may be understood as one way, among many, that men control or oppress women throughout the world. Everyone, then, is forced to consider the oppression of women present in their own societies. Naber explains how Americans may wish to use comparison as a strategy for teaching.

> . . . teaching against the grain of US media images of Middle Eastern women's supra-oppression, might entail: exploring the ways that rape in the US is institutionalized and protected by religion, universities, and the police force; quoting a US census statistic that shows that in 1991, in the US, 171,420 rapes were reported and that 2.3 million female rapes were reported between 1973 and 1987; teaching about how the historical concept (8th century) that wives are the property of their husbands continues to shape laws about rape and spousal abuse in the US; and looking at the north American states where women are not totally protected from rape by their husbands and where numerous women have been executed or imprisoned for killing their husbands out of self-defense.[11]

In other words, comparing the violence that is deeply embedded in our own culture with the violence of honor killings may help to reduce our neocolonialist tendencies.

A second strategy for writing against the grain of neocolonialism is to include examples of resistance. Naber explains, "I argued for demystifying images of supra-oppressed Middle Eastern women by teaching about Middle Eastern women's resistance, such as the thousand Jordanian women who marched in the streets after a recent honor killing."[12] Similarly, al-Fanar, a Palestinian feminist organization, emphasizes resistance to crimes of honor. A 1995 al-Fanar report offered several examples of demonstrations against honor crimes and provided a brief history of the organization's involvement with such demonstrations:

10. Naber, "Teaching About Honor Killings," 20.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 21.

> The first [al-Fanar] demonstration on this issue took place in June 1991, protesting the murder of a 19 year-old pregnant woman by her father and brother (it was later found that she had been raped by a family member). Political organizations, women's organizations in Palestinian society and Israeli women's organizations were invited to join the demonstration. Except for the members and supports of al-Fanar, not one representative of any other political or women's organization took part. The fear was immense. A leader of a Palestinian women's organization claimed that she could not participate in the demonstration because her presence could be construed as being "support for the girl's immoral behavior." The social taboo surrounding this issue and the lack of public acknowledgement was so great that even women who were personally angry about the phenomenon, feared social ostracizing or gossip. In contrast, Israeli feminists claimed that they could not understand what was the murder of women against the background of "family honor". In the course of 3.5 years of the organizations existence, al-Fanar held six demonstrations against murders and attempted murders of women. All earned media coverage which fueled the public debate. It appears that the phenomenon of ignorance and the taboo have disappeared, and that the walls of silence have been brought down. Today this struggle is gaining numerous supporters and sympathizers.[13]

While al-Fanar may be overestimating their own success (e.g., it is unlikely that the "phenomenon of ignorance and the taboo have disappeared" or that "the walls of silence have been brought down"), they do identify a growing public resistance to honor killings. Awareness of such demonstrations may show the complexity of the discussion of honor killings and again help to fight against neocolonialism. It is, then, with both enthusiasm and caution that I invite you to rethink Joseph's dilemma.

13. Al-Fanar, *Developments in the Struggle against the Murder of Women*, 41.