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OUR LADY'S MARRIAGE TO ST. JOSEPH

(Synopsis of the Seminar)

The present outline purposes to consider the marriage of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph in the light of biblical data almost exclusively. In other words, what can we learn of this marriage from Sacred Scripture?

At the outset we must take for granted that not only biblical law, but especially its interpretation as manifested in the laws and customs of the times was exactly followed by Mary and Joseph. Preliminary considerations of these prescriptions will cast light on the scanty New Testament data.¹

I. OLD TESTAMENT DATA

Although the Old Testament has many regulations concerning marriage prohibitions, etc., it contains no specific ordinances for the actual contraction of marriage. Deuteronomy 22:13-24 allows us to draw three conclusions relative to sanctioned marriage customs: (1) a period of time elapsed between betrothal and the final stage of the marriage; (2) The betrothed woman was considered (as least as regards sexual

¹ Some general studies of Hebrew marriage laws and customs, both biblical and rabbinic, may be found in Kornfeld (Old Testament), Cazelles (New Testament), art. *Mariage* in *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1954), pp. 905-935; Kortleitner, *Archeologia Biblica*, nova ed. (Innsbruck, 1917), pp. 546-572; Lesêtre, *Fiançailles*, in Vigouroux's *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1912), coll. 2230-2232; Lesêtre, *Mariage*, *ibid.*, vol. 4, coll. 758-774; A. Eberharder, *Das Ehe—und Familienrecht der Hebräer* (Münster i. W., 1914); Paterson, in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, 1900), pp. 262-277. Specifically rabbinic legislation will be found especially in the Mishnaic and Talmudic tractates "Ketuboth," "Qiddushin," and "Yebamoth." Epstein's *Marriage Laws in the Bible and Talmud* (Cambridge, 1942) contains no material bearing on the present paper.

intercourse with others) as the wife of her espoused; ² (3) On her wedding night the bride was expected to be a virgin under pain of death.³ These points formed the basis of later custom and rabbinic prescriptions.

II. RABBINIC PRESCRIPTIONS

Mishnaic and Talmudic prescriptions cannot be uncritically applied to any and all conditions of the first century A. D. However, the general prescriptions as to marriage and its customs so thoroughly pervade all pertinent parts of these works, with only exceptional discrepancies, that these general ordinances may safely be taken as a guide to the customs prevalent at the time of the marriage of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

(A) *Betrothal*

The ordinary age of betrothal for a Jewish virgin was at the beginning of puberty, when she became a *Na'arah* (12 years and one day to 12 years and six months).⁴ Following the formalities of betrothal the maiden continued to live at home for another year before the solemn ceremony of entering the house of the bridegroom.⁵

The legal status of betrothed couples may be roughly the

² "If within the city a man comes upon a virgin *who is betrothed*, and has relations with her, you shall bring them both to the gate of the city and there stone them to death: . . . because he violated his neighbor's wife." *Dt.* 22:23-24. Cf. also *Dt.* 20:7.

³ In case a charge of non-virginity on the wedding night could be proven, the bride was stoned to death. *Dt.* 22:13-21.

⁴ "Dass die Bestimmungen der Mishna über die Verlobung zum grössten Teil auf Na'ara zugeschnitten sind, beweist mehr als alles andere, dass das Alter der Na'ara (12-12½ Jahre) eben die gewöhnliche Verlobungszeit gewesen ist." Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. 2 (München, 1924), p. 374. E.g., "A man may give his daughter in betrothal while she is still in her girlhood. . . ." *Qiddushin* 2:1, *The Mishna*, trs. by Herbert Danby (London, 1933). Quotations from the *Mishna* will be from this translation.

⁵ "After the husband has demanded her, a virgin is granted twelve months

equivalent of what we would call a true *matrimonium ratum*. Although intercourse was not permitted until the bride's reception into the house of the groom,⁶ in most respects the couple were considered legally married so that they could be called husband and wife. The union could only be severed by a bill of divorce. The woman was considered a widow if her spouse died, and infidelity on her part was considered adultery.⁷

(B) *Wedding*

After the year of betrothal the bride was formally taken into the home of the groom, thereby completing the marriage contract.

wherein to provide for herself . . ." *Ketuboth* 5:2. Fuller treatment is given in the Talmudic tract *Ketuboth* 57a. This same tract discusses the time interval for a girl over 12½ years, some Rabbis contending that she is allowed a year, others, that she is to be equated with a widow and granted only a month.

⁶ Some commentators (chiefly for apologetic reasons) have held that such intercourse was permitted. P. Gächter has admirably shown that such an opinion is based on a false understanding of Rabbinic texts, viz., the fact that a betrothal could *validly* be inaugurated by intercourse does not argue to the moral legality of this or subsequent intercourse during betrothal. He demonstrates that the legality of intercourse during betrothal is actually contrary to the teaching of the Rabbis. Cf. P. Gächter, *The Chronology from Mary's Betrothal to the Birth of Christ*, in *Theological Studies*, vol. 2 (1941), pp. 147-156. That abuses existed—mainly in Judea during Syrian and Roman occupation—cannot be denied. That they were abuses should be clear from Mishnaic texts, such as the one cited in the following note.

⁷ On this point there is practically unanimous agreement of exegetes and Talmudic scholars. One citation from the Mishna can be regarded as representative: "The Ketubah of a virgin who after betrothal [only] became a widow or performed *Halitzah* is 200 denars, and a virginity suit may be lodged against her." *Ketubah* 1:2. Cf. Strack-Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, pp. 393-398. D. Buzy may be considered representative of the exegetes when he says "Les preuves en sont devenues classiques: (a) La fiancée infidèle était punie de la lapidation à l'instar de l'épouse coupable. (b) La fiancée qui perdait son fiancé était assimilée à une veuve. (c) La fiancée, comme l'épouse, ne pouvait être renvoyée que par une lettre de divorce. (d) L'enfant conçu au temps des fiançailles était regardé comme légitime." *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu*, in Pirot-Clamer, *La Sainte Bible*, vol. 9 (Paris, 1946), p. 7.

III. NEW TESTAMENT DATA

The Gospels testify—without any hesitation or doubt—that the marriage between the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph was a true marriage, the terms “wife” and “husband” are used frequently; the legal paternity of Christ is ascribed to St. Joseph, not only implicitly in the genealogies,⁸ but the term “father” is found also on the lips of the Blessed Virgin; both are referred to as “his parents.”⁹

However, direct testimony to the actual marriage is brief and given almost *per transennam*. St. Matthew, writing for Jewish converts, would have felt no necessity to do more than indicate that the proper legal forms were followed. His readers could supply the details from their own background. St. Luke simply takes the marriage for granted after the Annunciation. The pertinent texts are: “. . . the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a *virgin betrothed* (*emnēsteumenēn*) to a man named Joseph, of the house of David.”¹⁰

“Now the origin of Christ was in this wise. When Mary his mother had been betrothed (*mnēsteutheisēs*) to Joseph, she was found, *before they came together* (*prin ē synelthein*), to be with child by the Holy Spirit. But Joseph her husband (*o anēr autēs*), being a just man, . . . was minded to *put her away* privately. . . . ‘Do not be afraid, Joseph, son of David, to take (*paralabein*) to thee Mary thy wife (*tēn gynaika*).’ . . . So Joseph, arising from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took unto him his wife. And he did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn.”¹¹

⁸ According to Jewish custom, only the genealogy of the father is given. Hereditary rights, etc., derive through him alone. Cf. J. M. Vosté, *De conceptione virginali Jesu Christi; de Genealogia, de Fratribus Domini* (Romae, 1933), pp. 98-109.

⁹ *Lk.* 2:33, 41, 44, 58.

¹⁰ *Lk.* 1:26-27.

¹¹ *Mt.* 1:18-25.

Combining these texts with what has already been noted concerning the prevalent Jewish marriage customs, we can draw the following conclusions:

(1) The Blessed Virgin was probably slightly more than twelve years of age at the time of her betrothal to St. Joseph.

(2) There was a time lapse (one year) between her betrothal to St. Joseph and the actual beginning of communal married life.

(3) She could legally be called Joseph's wife by the angel in resolving Joseph's dilemma, even though this was during the betrothal period before she lived with Joseph.

(4) The betrothal was considered a true marriage that could only be terminated by a divorce.

(5) After the visit of the angel, Joseph completed the marriage by receiving Mary into his house.

The foregoing would be our conclusions on the basis of the evidence at hand were it not for certain objections raised from New Testament terminology. One of the words in question is the *synelthein* of *Mat.* 1:20. This has caused discussion from Patristic times onward. Of the moderns, Frangipane interprets this as meaning marital relations, and holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary was living with St. Joseph at the time of the Annunciation, thereby rejecting the interpretation given above.¹² Although he essays to base his opinion on philological grounds, basically his solution is founded on the idea that Our Lord could have been accused of being illegitimate, or at least tainted, had not the solemnization of the marriage taken place before the Annunciation. His philological arguments are based on the meaning of marital relations for *synerchomai* and the interpretation of *paralambanō* in the sense of to "re-assume"

¹² D. Frangipane, *Utrum B. V. Maria ab Angelo salutata iam in domo Joseph ut coniux fuerit*, in *Verbum Domini*, vol. 25 (1947), pp. 99-111. This view is also espoused by Ceuppens, *Theologia Biblica*, vol. 4: *De Mariologia Biblica* (Taurini, 1948), pp. 62-66.

the wife whom Joseph had mentally rejected. His understanding of the text of St. Matthew follows: "Christi autem generatio sic erat: Cum esset desponsata (scl. nupta) mater ejus Maria Joseph, antequam convenirent (*prin ē synelthein* = antequam in thalamum convenirent, scl. etsi numquam matrimonium usi essent), inventa est in utero habens de Spiritu Sancto. . . . Exurgens autem Joseph a somno, fecit sicut praecepit ei angelus Domini, et accepit (*parelaben* = aut reassumpsit aut apud se domi retinuit) conjugem suam."¹³

Although it is true that *synerchomai* is found in the sense of intercourse, it is not found "omnino frequens" as Frangipane states.¹⁴ The word simply means "come together." Its precise meaning in any writing must be determined by the context. Thus it is found in such diverse significations as "hold a meeting," "engage in battle," "have dealings with," etc.¹⁵ His understanding of *paralambanō* to mean "re-assume" would be a unique understanding of the verb. It is not justified by any occurrences in either classical or koiné Greek, as Father Holzmeister has pointed out.¹⁶ Apart from this, the interpretation labors under the (to me) psychological impossibility of St. Joseph arising from sleep to "re-assume" the wife whom he had mentally rejected. This hardly gives the verb its proper meaning.

Another argument of Frangipane is St. Luke's use of the same verb (*mnēsteuō*) to describe the marital status of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Annunciation and at the birth of

¹³ *Art. cit.*, p. 104.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. Liddell-Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1940), *s.v.*; Strack-Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 45 translate "Ehe er sie heimholte," and explain "Die Worte bezeichnen vielmehr die *haknasah*, die Aufnahme der Maria in Josephs Haus . . . u. besagen, dass bevor noch das häusliche u. eheliche Zusammenleben begonnen hatte, Maria als schwanger befunden wurde."

¹⁶ Holzmeister, *De nuptiis S. Joseph*, in *Verbum Domini*, vol. 25 (1947), pp. 145-146. Cf. also Liddell-Scott, *op. cit.*, *s.v.*

the Savior.¹⁷ He concludes from this that the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph must have been in the same legal status at both times, viz., living together. On strictly philological grounds his conclusion should have been the opposite, i.e., the final stage of the marriage had not as yet taken place and the couple were still only in the betrothal period. (The verb simply means "betrothed."¹⁸) Such a conclusion, however, is patently foreign to the mind of the Evangelist as was recognized by the early copyist who inserted the "*uxore*" in the Latin. The reason for St. Luke's use of *mnēsteuō* in connection with the birth of Christ is correctly interpreted as indicating St. Luke's emphasis on the virginity of the Blessed Virgin.¹⁹

The Virgin Marriage ²⁰

Apart from the Blessed Virgin's words recorded in *Lk.* 1:34 there is no explicit New Testament testimony regarding the virginal status of the marriage of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. However, the standard objections to a virginal marriage (sc. "brothers of the Lord," etc.) can all be an-

¹⁷ Frangipane, *art. cit.*, p. 103.

¹⁸ Classical and post-classical Greek usage is decisive for this meaning. Cf. Liddell-Scott, *op. cit.*, s.v. In the Septuagint *mnēsteuō* is used only to translate the Hebrew verb '*aras*' (betroth). Thus, in the section of Deuteronomy cited above (chapter 22), it translates '*aras*' four times. There can be no doubt of this exclusive meaning for the Septuagint. To argue, as does Ceuppens, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66, that St. Luke means "married" by the verb in 2:5 and, therefore, also in 1:27, is inverting the proper procedure. That St. Luke's use of *mnēsteuō* in 2:5 demands an explanation is true, but Ceuppens' solution is philologically unsound.

¹⁹ Thus, Marchal: "En omettant la mention du mariage et en reprenant le même terme vague, *emnēsteumenē*, qu'au v. 27, Luc entend sans doute mieux marquer la virginité de Marie." Cf. *Évangile selon Saint Luc*, in Pirot-Clamer, *La Sainte Bible*, vol. 10 (Paris, 1946), p. 43. So also Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Luc*, 7th ed. (Paris, 1948), p. 70.

²⁰ One of the more thorough treatments of this point will be found in J. Mueller, *The Fatherhood of St. Joseph* (St. Louis, Mo., 1952), esp. pp. 22-68.

swered on the basis of scriptural usage.²¹ Since these points have been adequately treated elsewhere in this volume, there is no need to discuss them here.

This paper, then, has sought to place the marriage of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph in its historical context, and to show that although the marriage was virginal, it was, nevertheless, a true marriage entered into in full conformity with the customs of New Testament times.

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²¹ Cf. Vosté, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-128.