Augustus's Diatribe to Roman Bachelors; Institution of the Census of 8 B.C.; Joseph & Mary: From Betrothal to Nuptials: the Romance, the Dowry, & the Betrothal; Joseph's Dilemma; Thieme on Men's Responsibility to Protect Women; Mary & the Miracle of Parthenogenesis

One of the major breakdowns in civil society was the diminishment of marriage as a cultural institution. Sexual promiscuity had become widespread and resulted in what we used to describe in our culture as children without benefit of clergy. Alarming to Augustus was that there were more children being born out of wedlock than within.

Under the Empire, the Roman Forum became a center for religious and secular spectacles and ceremonies. It was the site of many of the city's most imposing temples and monuments. Among the structures surviving in whole or in part are the Temple of Castor and Pollux, the Temple of the Deified Caesar, the Mamertine Prison, the Curia, or senate house, the Temple of Saturn, the Temple of Vesta, the Temple of Romulus, and the Arch of Titus.[1] On one occasion Augustus decided to take a random poll of the men who gathered at the Forum. He asked a group of men to divide themselves into two groups—bachelors and husbands. The former so outnumbered the latter than Augustus launched into this diatribe:

> **What shall I call you? *Men?* But you aren't fulfilling the duties of men. *Citizens?* But for all your efforts, the city is perishing. *Romans?* But you are in the process of blotting out this name altogether! … What humanity would be left if all the rest of mankind should do what you are doing? … *You are committing murder* in not fathering in the first place those who ought to be your descendants![2]**

To stimulate matrimony, Augustus decreed edicts making adultery, fornication, and other deviancies from the institution of marriage a crime and conferred political benefit to men who were the fathers of at least three legitimate children. On the other hand, bachelors were not allowed to receive inheritances, a restriction that many sought to avoid by marrying infant girls which Augustus countered by setting the minimum age of ten for girls to become engaged followed by a two years for courtship.

It is believed by some historians that because Augustus wanted to determine the effectiveness of his efforts he instituted a number of censuses during his 41-year reign. In addition to its primary focus on taxation, the censuses were also designed to reflect whether or not marriage and birth rates increased as a result of his new laws.

The census mentioned in Luke 2:1–3 was instituted in 8 B.C. and, due to the vast size of the Empire, the edict did not apply to Judea until 5 B.C., the year that chronologists confirm was the year of the virgin birth.

I.   Joseph and Mary: From Betrothal to Nuptials

The relationship between Joseph and Mary developed in the northern province of Palestine called Galilee and in the small town of Nazareth populated by around 200 people. The area was somewhat isolated in a basin some ten miles north of the Valley of Jezreel. Its citizens were socially conservative, observing the tenets of the Mosaic Law.

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[1] *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 4:244.
[2] "The harangue against the bachelors is recorded by Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 1vi, 1–10" (Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, 6n3).

Nazarene describes a resident of the community that by the first century was populated by a mixture of peoples possessing a rough dialect and considered outsiders by those to the south. Many were seditious and rebellious types. At the time of the Lord's birth the term designated a resident but during the thirty years prior to His public ministry it became a term of derision. When Philip informed Nathanael that the Messiah was "Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph," Nathanael's response was, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

The Nazareth of 5 B.C. was a village of a better reputation made up of craftsmen such as Joseph who was a carpenter. He was, according to the genealogy of Matthew 1:6 cf. 1:16, of the line of David through Solomon. It is estimated that he was in his mid twenties, but Mary, a fellow Nazarene, was probably in her mid teens. Her lineage, according to the genealogy of Luke 3:23 cf. 3:31, was also of the line of David but through Nathan[3].

Scripture does not reveal the courtship and betrothal of Joseph, the legal or foster father of Jesus, or Mary, the mother of Jesus' true humanity, but the traditions of the day give some insight to what likely occurred.

Once Joseph decided that Mary was his right woman, following custom, he approached his father for permission to marry her. The circumstance that the two were distant cousins did not violate biblical mandates against their union. They were both of the royal bloodline of Judah, direct descendants of David, which was an imperative to fulfill the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7:8–17.

In the Jewish culture, marriage was a contractual agreement not only between the couple but also their families. The two fathers negotiated regarding the dowry. The Hebrew word is מֹהַר (*mohar*), the "purchase price" of a bride paid to the bride's family. It could be a sum of money but not a fixed sum. It is compensation to the father for the loss of his daughter and the means of providing her certain necessities.[4]

Once the dowry was determined then Joseph was brought before Mary where a benediction was said by the parents. This established the legality of the betrothal between the two. Only a writ of divorcement could break the contract even though they were not yet married. Should Mary commit adultery it would constitute a capital crime, punishable by death through stoning (Deuteronomy 22:20–25). This is why Joseph was in a dilemma when he learned of Mary's pregnancy:

> **Matthew 1:19** - And Joseph her husband, being [εἰμί, *eimi*] a righteous [δίκαιος, *dikaios*] man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away privately.

The phrase "being a righteous man" begins with the present active participle of the verb *eimi*. It is linear *aktionsart* indicating continuous action. Joseph was a man of integrity. He is also noted as being righteous: *dikaios*, which means he was a believer in the coming Messiah.

Because of these things, he did not want to disgrace her. So, after giving the situation detailed thought, the decided not to go through legal channels but to quietly return her to her father.

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[3] "Matthew presents Joseph's genealogy, whereas Luke presents Mary's genealogy. This view is supported by linguistic and historical evidence and is held by many students of the Bible. In addition, appeal may be made to Num. 27:1–11 and 36:1–12 to give Scriptural precedent for the substitution of Joseph's name in Luke 3:23" (C. I. Scofield, ed., "The Genealogies of Jesus," in *The Scofield Study Bible: NASB* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], 1409).

[4] Peter Trutza, "Marriage," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 4:96.

This is an area of personal sacrifice. By deciding to follow the least public approach, Joseph demonstrated his true love for Mary. A man would never humiliate the woman he loves in public but rather protect her at all costs:

> **A man who really loves the woman protects the woman. I'm talking about mental-attitude love. This means that a man never abuses a woman in public, he never runs her down in public, he never exposes her faults to the public, he never runs around and talks about her … he keeps his mouth shut. And if he has anything to say publically or in front of others about the woman he loves, it is strictly complimentary. He protects, and Joseph was that kind of man.[5]**

As usual for the positive believer, solutions to intractable dilemmas are resolved by application of the Word of God. Joseph had wisdom enough to know that if he went the legal route that Mary's name would be besmirched throughout Nazareth. Having no knowledge of the fact that his betrothed was pregnant due to parthenogenesis: "Reproduction without concourse of opposite sexes or union of sexual elements,"[6] Joseph considered a bill of divorcement.

Parthenogenesis is a compound of two Greek words: (1) παρθένος (*parthenos*): virgin, and (2) γένεσις (*genesis*): origination. The 23 male chromosomes, miraculously created by the Holy Spirit, were united with Mary's ovum to produce the perfect zygote of the Lord's true humanity.

Ignorant of this, Joseph's ability to completely protect Mary's honor was impossible. Her pregnancy would eventually become known but at least the citizens of Nazareth would assume it was Joseph's since in other parts of Judea more liberal attitudes toward the betrothal period allowed such behavior. He would at least have spared her a stoning and he would be able to assume the blame.

His problem was resolved by the appearance of an angelic messenger with the news that not only was the pregnancy not the product of adultery but rather the miraculous appearance of the Messiah into human history.

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[5] R. B. Thieme, Jr., *Matthew*, MP3 CD (Houston: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 1965), 438-003.
[6] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.: "parthenogenesis."