

Was Mary married to Joseph?

Various translations of *Luke* 1:27 state that Mary was *betrothed* or *espoused* to Joseph. It is important that we do not “read between the lines,” making the faulty assumption that being *betrothed* to Joseph precluded Mary’s being married to him. Nowhere should a translation of Sacred Scripture indicate that Mary was not married to Joseph at the time of the Annunciation and Incarnation. It is, in fact, erroneous to make such a claim. Translations in which Mary declares, “I have no husband” (*Luke* 1:34, RSVCE) instead of the more correct, “I know not man” (Douay-Rheims), stand in opposition to the perennial teaching of the Catholic Church, for although their marriage had not been consummated, a marriage had been contracted between Joseph and Mary.

The question of Mary and Joseph’s betrothal deals with Jewish law as it was two thousand years ago, so that it has no exact equivalent in American life. For this reason, we must begin our discussion by distancing ourselves from the modern-day understanding of the words *betrothal* and *espousal*.

Mosaic law provides for a two-part marriage ceremony. It begins with the *kidushin* (often translated as *betrothal* or *espousal*), in which the man gives to the woman a marriage document or something of monetary value (most commonly, a ring) in the presence of two witnesses. If he gives her a ring, he declares, “Behold, you are betrothed unto me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel,” as he places the ring on her finger. In Jewish law, that is the central moment of the wedding ceremony.

At the time of their betrothal, Joseph and Mary were fully married, but they were prohibited from cohabitation. Assuming the *kidushin* was legally performed (with two witnesses and a written contract or an object of monetary value exchanged), the two were bound together before God as a married couple. The betrothal brought with it serious obligations. Effectively, we can liken it to *matrimonium ratum et non consummatum*, marriage validly contracted yet not consummated. Though not a perfect analogy, this gives us an idea of the obligation that was involved: the parties were committed to one another. Neither could go back on the betrothal. Such had been the Jewish custom for at least a thousand years before the Incarnation.

At the time of Joseph and Mary’s betrothal, the young husband and wife would have stayed in their respective parents’ homes, usually for about a year, while the husband built and furnished a house and became proficient at a trade. When the husband was fully ready, the happy couple celebrated the second part of the marriage ceremony, the *nisuin*, and the wife moved into her husband’s home. The *nisuin* was the solemnization of the marriage. Its primary focus was on the *ketubah*, in which the groom formally accepted responsibilities to provide food, shelter and clothing for his wife, and to attend to her emotional needs. After the *ketubah* was signed by the groom and two witnesses and given to the bride, the marriage was solemnized and the bride, now assured of her marital rights, moved into the groom’s house.

Once we understand the meaning of a betrothal in the Jewish culture of the time, it becomes abundantly clear that, at the time of the Annunciation, Mary and Joseph were spouses in the proper sense. Saint Matthew calls Mary Joseph’s wife: the angel appeared to Joseph, telling him “do not be afraid, Joseph, son of David, to take to yourself Mary, your wife, for that which is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit” (*Matthew* 1:20-21). This truth was reaffirmed by Blessed Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Custos*: “According to Jewish custom, marriage took place in two stages: first, the legal, or true marriage was celebrated, and then, only after a certain period of time, the husband brought the wife into his own house. Thus, before he lived with Mary, Joseph was already her *husband*” (18). There can be no doubt that Joseph’s marriage to Mary had begun. They were a family, even though the second part of the marriage ceremony (bringing Mary into Joseph’s home) had not yet taken place. Jesus’ miraculous conception occurred between the first and second parts.

It is important to consider also the text of *Matthew* 1:19 in this discussion. Saint Matthew tells us that “her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly.” Not only does Saint Matthew tell us explicitly that the two were married, but he gives us insight into Saint Joseph’s goodness. Joseph wanted to divorce Mary quietly because, if he divorced her publicly, she would have been liable to stoning, as was the woman caught in adultery in the *Gospel of John* (cf. 8:3-11). Clearly, if Mary and Joseph were not married, there would be no need for a divorce; furthermore, if they were not

married, Mary may have been looked upon as a harlot, but she would not have been liable to death by stoning.

Finally, in his recent revision of *Father John A. Hardon's Basic Catholic Catechism Course*, His Eminence Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke goes to great length to address this important point:

The reason for the virginal marriage of Mary with Saint Joseph was to secure the conception and birth of Jesus within wedlock, the normal context for all conception and birth. For all who are born of man and woman are intended eventually to be part of the Holy Family first constituted by Joseph, Mary and Jesus. For Jesus to have been born out of wedlock would, in fact, make the Holy Family something significantly less than holy. The fact that Jesus was virginally conceived and born after the marriage of Mary and Joseph means that Jesus was conceived and born within wedlock. This is contrary to what so many, even priests, are saying at the present time, namely, that Jesus was born out of wedlock, like the children of so many unmarried women today, and that this is not an 'abnormal' situation. A pregnant, un-wed mother is said to be, according to these people, in the same condition as Mary, who they claim was also un-wed at the time she conceived Jesus. This is false; it is indeed a very serious falsehood, for it undermines the sanctity of marriage and the reason for that sanctity. It is said by defenders of this position that Jesus was conceived after Mary and Joseph were engaged, but not yet married. This is not true, as we will see.

The word *betrothal*, often used to translate what is in origin a Hebrew word, does not mean, in this case, engagement to be married at some future date. Rather, it corresponds to the Hebrew word, *kidushin*, designating a marriage actually contracted: in Latin *matrimonium ratum*, or marriage contracted but not yet consummated. In Hebrew times, marriage was a two-step affair after what we call an engagement or a promise to marry. The two steps were the *kidushin* and the *nisuin*. The *kidushin* was first; it created the marriage bond between the bride and the groom. Even though they were now married until death, the bride remained a virgin and continued to live with her parents or guardians. Any intercourse during this period with a man other than her husband constituted a sin of adultery. This would not have been the case, were she only engaged. Intercourse with an unmarried man during engagement would have been a sin of fornication, not adultery. The *nisuin* took place about one year later. At this point in the marriage, the woman moved to her husband's home, at which time the marriage was normally consummated.

From this we can understand why, in ancient times, Christian marriage was often also carried out in two steps separated in time. The two steps corresponded respectively to the contraction of marriage (or its consecration) and to its use. In more recent times, the two steps, not only in Christian but in Jewish marriage, came to be combined as a single step. But it is interesting that the rite of Christian marriage should initially have been modeled on that of Mary and Joseph, and that the actual theological-canonical language used by the Church to speak of marriage as a contract (*matrimonium ratum*) and of marriage as consummated (*matrimonium ratum et consummatum*) should find its basis in the virginal marriage of Mary and Joseph (*Basic Catholic Catechism Course, Revised and Updated*, p. 27, para. 3-5).