

## Was Joseph married before Mary?

The suggestion that Joseph was married previous to being mentioned in Scripture as Mary's betrothed is completely fictional (Luke 1:26-27). There is no scriptural evidence, or even a subtle suggestion, that Joseph was married to anyone but Mary. We do not know the age of Joseph, and it is possible that he was considerably older than Mary was. Such an arrangement was common in those days. At the same time, it is just as likely that Joseph was only a few years older than Mary. Joseph's age is irrelevant since it is not given in the Bible and has nothing to do with whether or not he was a widower.

The idea that Mary was Joseph's second wife originated with Catholic tradition in an effort to explain the existence of Jesus' "brothers and sisters" (Matthew 13:55). Some of Jesus' siblings are even named in the Bible: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. Catholic tradition has long asserted that these individuals might actually be cousins of Jesus or children of Joseph from an earlier marriage. Catholics, with the help of some pseudepigraphical books, have constructed an entirely fictional account of Joseph, saying he was an older man who had been married and had many other children before courting Mary. This theory is crucial to Catholic theology in order to substantiate their doctrine that Mary remained a virgin, even after giving birth to Jesus.

It is true that Mary was a virgin when the angel Gabriel appeared to her to announce that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah (Luke 1:34-35). And the Bible is clear that she was still a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus (Matthew 1:25). But Joseph had taken Mary to be his wife (Matthew 1:20), and there is no suggestion that her role as Joseph's wife was in any way different from the role of any other wife. Matthew 1:25 says, "But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son"

(emphasis added). The word until speaks of a change to the first action. The implication is that the consummation of the marriage occurred after the birth of Mary's son. The meaning is similar to that of this sentence: "Bobby could not access his trust fund until he turned 25." Until means there was a time when the first action (having no access) changed to something else (access). The structure of Matthew 1:25 clearly suggests that consummation did, in fact, occur after the birth.

If other children had been present before Joseph's marriage to Mary, it is likely they would have been mentioned in one of the gospel accounts of the birth of Christ, especially Luke's very detailed description of the trip to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-20) and Matthew's report of the subsequent flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). In verse 13 Matthew records the angel telling Joseph, "Get up, . . . take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." Joseph is to take two people, Mary and Jesus, not a larger brood from a previous marriage.

Then in Matthew 2:20-21, the angel again tells Joseph, "'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.' So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel." Again, only Mary and the Christ Child are mentioned. There are no older children, which would imply that Jesus' subsequent brothers and sisters were all younger and came along as the natural result of Mary and Joseph's normal marital relations.

It is often tempting to try to make Scripture say something it does not say in order to create a theology we like. But we should remember a basic principle of scriptural interpretation: "Whenever possible, let Scripture interpret Scripture." We get into

trouble when we try to make God's Word fit our preconceived ideas or a doctrine we find comforting. The notion of Joseph's previous marriage is such an idea and has no foundation in God's Word.