

Theological Studies



THE CHRONOLOGY FROM MARY'S BETROTHAL TO THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

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THE purpose of this essay is to establish as probable the following chronology: Mary was betrothed in the autumn (9 B.C.); the Annunciation occurred in June-July, the Visitation began soon after, the return to Nazareth was in October-November, quickly followed by the journey to Bethlehem (8 B.C.); the Nativity occurred in March-April (7 B.C.).

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The two infancy-narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke are, for our modern minds, rather fragmentary. For lack of direct information it is now seemingly impossible for us to fill up any of the gaps, whereas for the early Christian readers much was readily supplied from their common experience. The Gospels, unfortunately, do not mention the many facts which were matters of course to the Palestinian of those days. The result was a history crowded with supernatural events, in fact consisting almost exclusively of such. If we want a somewhat complete history of the infancy of Our Lord, we must try to insert the natural events into the series of the supernatural. These natural events will largely be found among such occurrences as an oriental writer would not have deemed necessary to mention, because they always took place in similar circumstances. Nobody can, therefore, reasonably object to applying to Mary and Joseph things that were commonplace in their days, the *communiter contingentia*. We can gather them partly from Jewish sources, particularly from the laws of the Mishnic and Talmudic periods, as these laws reflect the regularly occurring events of life; or the gaps can be partly filled in from such human feelings as are common to all civilized nations including the Jewish nation such as it was at that time.

There is ample reason to emphasize this rule of interpretation. First, because not a few scholars who apply it in other Biblical matters call its application to the infancy-narratives imagination. Secondly, because psychological explanations have been overdone and consequently are considered, in many quarters, as utterly suspect. Yet they are freely used by every historian, and justly so; they must be taken account of, if ever human actions have to be recounted and explained. The third reason is found in what devotion has made of the infancy of Our Lord, and in particular of the life of Mary, His Mother, with whom we shall be concerned in this paper. From the second century on, a strong and rather untempered predilection for the supernatural has in many places tampered with the story of Mary's life; persons who yield enthusiastically to such predi-

lection utterly dislike any sober research work; they incline to reject the results of research on the ground of alleged tradition, which in reality has no connection with the times of the apostles, and they often act with an altogether unwarranted air of competence in the matter. If they would only accept the results of exegesis as being what these results actually are: conclusions of a greater or lesser degree of certainty or probability, their devotion would be none the worse for it.

The aim of the following inquiry is to try to place the great incidents in Mary's life, from the time when she was betrothed, to the birth of Our Lord, in their correct chronological setting.

I. JEWISH MARRIAGE LAWS AND CUSTOMS.

1. THE BETROTHAL OF THE ANCIENT JEWS. It is a common opinion among Catholic scholars that the betrothal in the days of Mary conferred on the betrothed the right of sexual intercourse. In this sense *J. Knabenbauer* writes: "Quamvis itaque desponsatione facta iam iis praesto essent more antiquo iura matrimonii. . . ."¹ Similarly *P. Dausch* says: "Nach jüdischer Anschauung bestand zwischen Braut und wirklicher Frau in rechtlicher Beziehung kein Unterschied."² Even a Jewish scholar, *C. G. Montefiore*, explains *betrothed* in Mt. 1, 18 thus: "They were legally married according to Jewish law."³

It is easily understood that this point is of no slight importance. If they had full marriage rights, Mary as well as Joseph would have felt quite differently than they did, if they did not yet enjoy marriage rights. Could the conception of Jesus during their betrothal be looked upon as a harmless, regular occurrence? Or was it regarded as an act of immorality, or, at least, as bad conduct? If we can settle this point, all the subsequent events will be placed in their proper moral background. The following gleanings from Jewish sources will, I

¹*Commentarius in Ev. scdm Matthaeum*³ (Cursus Scripturae S.) I, Parisiis, 1922, p. 98.

²*Die drei älteren Evangelien*⁴, Bonn, 1932, p. 46.

³*The Synoptic Gospels*, II, London, 1927, p. 5.

think, make it clear, that the ancient Jews did not consider sexual intercourse of betrothed people a proper thing.

Some general remarks about the rabbinical laws concerning betrothal will form a basis for further observations. Betrothal, as distinct from marriage, was called *'erusin* or *qiddušin*. The wooer was supposed to ask or rather to persuade the girl to consent to marry him,⁴ whereby some formula expressing their intention to marry was to be said, as for instance: "Be my wife."⁵ Moreover, the wooer and the bride's father settled between them the girl's trousseau and her dowry, as well as a sum of money which the bridegroom had to pay (*K^ethubba*). By these conventions a legal position was created which surpassed the rights and obligations of our modern betrothal. Some time after the betrothal married life began when the marriage feast was celebrated. It was called *the taking*, namely of the bride into the bridegroom's house (*nissu'in* or *liqquḥin*).⁶

The opinion that the betrothal conferred the fullness of marriage rights, seems to be based upon a principle laid down in the Mishna and in the Tosephta, and largely dwelt upon in the Talmuds: "A wife can be acquired in three ways . . . by money, by a document, and by intercourse."⁷ These were as many different forms of legally valid betrothals. In each case some formula or other expressed the intention to marry. Sexual intercourse, therefore, created as legal a state as any other form of betrothal, a custom which can be traced back to a time as early as the lifetime of Gamaliel I (20 B.C.-50 A.D.)⁸ Intercourse had a similar effect, if it took place with a man's widowed sister-in-law.⁹ Even a scholar like Paul Billerbeck was impressed by such regulations, so that he was inclined to think that sexual intercourse between betrothed people was quite lawful. But he remarks: "The last manner presumably has, at

⁴"The taking" (*ma^amar*, also, *šidduqin*).

⁵*Qiddušin*, 5b—6a.

⁶Occasionally, instead of these terms the word *huppa* (wedding canopy) is used.

⁷*Qiddušin*, 1, 1, *T Qid.* 1, 1 (p. 334); *Qid.* 14a, and other passages.

⁸*J^ebamoth*, 5, 1.

⁹*J^ebamoth*, 6, 1. *Sanhedrin*, 55b.

an early date, come to be looked upon as improper."¹⁰ That this assumption is not quite in keeping with historical facts will be seen later.

2. THE VIRGINITY OF THE BRIDE. If we consider the Mishnic law more closely, we shall see that it neither expresses nor suggests that people after their betrothal have the full rights of married persons. One cannot even infer that it approves equally of all the three ways of betrothal. Certainly no word of recommendation of the third way can be found either in the literature of the Mishnic or of the Talmudic period. What the Mishna *Qiddušin* 1, 1, does say is this: If the copula has taken place, together with an accepted invitation to a later marriage, the betrothal is considered as legally established.—But the sources allow one to go a step further.

The five following observations, incomplete as they may be, will prove, that not only betrothal by intercourse, but any such act before the marriage feast was considered improper, or, as our moral theology would put it, a grievous sin.

A. RABH'S DECISION. Rabh (died 247 A.D.) enjoyed an authority among the rabbis above that of any one else in his days or thereafter. His intimate relation with R. J^huda ha-Nasi secured for him even the dignity of a *tanna* or *tradens* of the Mishnic period.¹¹ Rabh was strongly opposed to what we have seen to be the third way of betrothal.

"Once somebody performed a betrothal in the street by (handing over) a twig of myrtle. Thereupon R. Aḥa bar Ḥona sent to R. Joseph [bar Ḥijja, died 333 A.D.] to ask him what should be done. He answered: 'Have him scourged as Rabh has done, and impose upon him to write a letter of divorce as Š^emuel used to do.'"—This advice is explained as follows: "Rabh, namely, had scourging meted out for marriage (or betrothal)¹² in the street, for betrothal by sexual intercourse,

¹⁰*Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, II Muenchen, 1924, p. 394.

¹¹K^ethuboth, 8a.

¹²Al dimkiddei.

for betrothal without wooing¹³ . . . and to a betrothed man who dwelled with his father-in-law." It was, as this last remark shows, a procedure against certain betrothed, not married men. The text further adds that the punishment for a betrothal by intercourse was inflicted "on account of its licentiousness."¹⁴ Rabh, therefore, must have been the first to introduce whipping in the synagogue for such a procedure. Was he the first to condemn it? Certainly not. If it had not been looked upon with common disapproval long before Rabh's time, he would scarcely have introduced the punishment.

This coarse way of performing the betrothal, therefore, except in its legal consequences, must have been looked upon as an immoral act by every decent-minded man. The following considerations are perfectly in keeping with this conclusion.

B. THE WEDDING DAY OF A VIRGIN. Had sexual intercourse ever been considered as decent, it would have, no doubt, become the most common form of betrothal. Instead, a bride who was not a widow, was still supposed to be a virgin when she entered into married life at the *nissu'in*. And this was the common supposition well before the close of the first century.

Before the revolt under Hadrian and its sad consequences, that is, before 132-135 A.D., maidens were supposed to marry on Wednesdays (on the fourth day of the sabbath week). The time from Sunday to Tuesday was filled up by the immediate preparations for the festivity.¹⁵ Thursdays were the court days, which gave the bridegroom an opportunity to sue his bride, if she had lost her virginity previous to her marriage. "A virgin is to be married on the fourth day (of the sabbath week), a widow on the fifth; for twice a week the courts hold sessions in towns, on the second and on the fifth, so that he [the bridegroom] in case he has to make an accusation concerning virginity, can go to court on the very next morning [after his wedding]."¹⁶ Later this custom changed somewhat and law

¹³Sidduqe.

¹⁴Qiddušin, 12b.

¹⁵T K^othuboth, 1, 1 (260); bread was baked, cattle slaughtered, and wine mixed (with water!).

¹⁶K^othuboth, 1, 1.

took account of the change. "From the time of danger and onward [that is, the persecution under Hadrian] they [the maiden brides] used to marry on the third day, nor did the rabbis [literally, the wise men] hinder it."¹⁷ By this device one tried to avoid the danger lest the Roman official in charge might claim the *ius primae noctis*.¹⁸

This change of an old custom, and the law itself which embodied conditions that had prevailed previous to about 132 A.D., are striking proofs, that from times immemorial, people expected a maiden bride to have preserved her virginal honour. Any action contrary to this custom must have been considered a great offense against approved and proper conduct. If such was the case, it must be considered as impossible that any sexual intercourse, whether in view of a betrothal, or else between betrothed people, was at any time looked upon as free of guilt. It may be added that common people are, within certain limits, on no other point so delicate and strict as on sexual purity.

C. THE SEPARATION OF THE BETROTHED. It was, moreover, deemed a matter of course, that up to the day of the wedding feast bride and bridegroom should never meet apart from other people. Rabb, according to the tradition mentioned above, had bridegrooms flogged who had "lived" in the house of their fathers-in-law;¹⁹ this very likely meant sleeping in the father-in-law's house, therefore, in the same room with the bride, as the Palestinian houses, as a rule, had only one room. The general law was this: "She [the daughter] remains under the tutelage of her father until she comes under the tutelage of her husband at her wedding."²⁰ To live under the tutelage of her father was as much as living in his house."²¹ How strictly this rule was interpreted, may be gathered from an *exception introduced throughout Judea* by the same circumstances and reasons as the change concerning the wedding day.

¹⁷T K^eth, 1, 1. Compare Billerbeck, II, 398.

¹⁸K^eth., 3b.

¹⁹Qiddušin, 12b.

²⁰ℓ^enissu'in, or, as the variant reading has it, ℓ^ebuḥḥa, K^ethuboth, 4, 5.

²¹N^edarim, 10, 4.

A mishna states: "If anyone in Judea takes food in the house of his father-in-law, without witnesses being present [that is, if the betrothed met alone at dinner-time, which was, according to custom, in the evening], he cannot move an accusation [against his bride on the day after their wedding] concerning her virginity [as having been lost], as he had already been alone with her."²² This exception is explained by other occasional remarks. In Judea according to R. J^ehuda (circa 150 A.D.) they permitted the betrothed to be alone for an hour (sometime during the period of their betrothal) "in order that his heart may become bold towards her."²³ It meant another way, besides anticipating the wedding by one day, to thwart the desire of the Roman Governor. The difference between Judea and Galilee in this matter appears in several other passages. In Judea the virginity of the bride was inquired into before she entered the bridal chamber; whosoever wanted the girl to remain a virgin until her wedding, appointed two people to guard her;²⁴ the bride was often called *h^eru^afa* (literally: a *violated one*) because of the premarital loss of her virginity.²⁵ In Galilee these things did not take place for the obvious reason that there the Galileans observed rigorously the traditional decency through all those centuries, after the Roman conquest as before; bride and bridegroom never met in private before their wedding. Once the new custom was introduced in Judea, it was to be expected that it would not die out anymore. "Although the persecution came to an end, that custom did not cease," complains the Palestinian Talmud.²⁶ That is why we can not agree with Billerbeck that the possibility of performing a betrothal by sexual intercourse, if at one time generally recognized as proper, could die out by a mere change of public opinion. The young people would always have held their own.

²²K^ethuboth, 1, 5.

²³J^ebamoth, 4, 10; T K^ethuboth, 1, 6.

²⁴T K^eth, 1, 4 (261); compare Billerbeck, I, 45-46.

²⁵Qiddušin, 6a. Goldschmidt translates "hingegebene;" but compare J. Levy, *Neuhebraeische und Chaldaeisches Woerterbuch*, II, 114.

²⁶p K^ethuboth, 1, 25c. For this section see Billerbeck, I, 45-47.

D. THE K^eTHUBBA OF A VIRGIN. The old Jewish esteem of the virginity of the bride found its way even into money matters. "A virgin receives a *k^ethubba* of 200 [denars], a widow only 1 min [*circa* 100 denars]" provided this widow had not only been betrothed, but really married. The text continues: "A virgin who after her betrothal [but before being married] became a widow, was divorced, or became a *haluça*, receives [at a new betrothal] 200 denars, and she can be brought to court on behalf of her virginity."²⁷

Such laws would be of no consequence, or rather could never have been introduced, unless it was commonly taken for granted that a maiden would enter into her bridegroom's house as a virgin. This mishna obviously is no more than an expression of an original, century-old practice. That it involved questions of money, weighs all the heavier, since regulations of that sort presuppose well-established conditions.

E. THE BLESSING OF THE BETROTHED. Another confirmation of our thesis can be gathered from the usage and the formulas of blessing pronounced over bride and bridegroom on their betrothal and wedding days respectively. According to the more ancient custom (*tannu rabbanan*) the blessing of the couple was given in the house of wedding (*b^ebeth h^ethanim*), therefore, in the house of the bridegroom. Contrary to this custom R. J^ehuda (circa 150 A.D.) demanded that it should be said "also in the house of the betrothal (*b^ebeth ha-'erusin*)" therefore, in the house of the bride. Why such a demand? R. Abajje (died 338/9 A.D.) gives the correct explanation: R. J^ehuda had in view the conditions in Judea, which have already been mentioned. In Judea it became necessary to pronounce the bridal blessing even upon the betrothed, "because there he [the bridegroom] is allowed to be alone with her [his fiancée]."²⁸ Jewish piety required that married life should not begin without the blessing.

Here again we see that up to the epoch of Hadrian sexual

²⁷K^ethuboth, 1, 2.

²⁸K^ethuboth, 7b.

intercourse (in view of marriage) was not supposed to take place before marriage. For this same reason, somewhat later, but still within the second century, and outside of Judea, a proper formula of blessing for the betrothal came into practise.

An anonymous tradition of the Tannaitic period (before 200 A.D.) says: "They say the blessing of marriage (*birkath h^athanin*) in the house of the wedding [of the bridegroom], and the blessing of the betrothal (*birkath ha'erusin*) in the house of the betrothal [of the bride]."²⁹ Such a formula of blessing was handed down in the name of R. J^ehuda (died 299 A.D. in Palestine): "Blessed be He who has sanctified us by his commandments, who has forbidden us immoral deeds, and who has prevented us from [having intercourse with] the betrothed, but has given at our disposal those who, with betrothal, in virtue of the *huppa* [by wedding] have become married people."³⁰

All these various considerations tend to show that previous to a change which took place in Judea under Hadrian, and outside of Judea before and forever afterwards, sexual intercourse with a girl in view of a future marriage, and sexual intercourse between betrothed people was considered disgraceful. True, the law recognised such intercourse as a means of betrothal, but hinted not a word to encourage it. On the contrary the general spirit, of which the alleged laws and regulations were as many natural off-shoots, imposed upon the young people a not inconsiderable self-restraint; whosoever could not bear it, by necessity incurred common disgrace as soon as his action became publicly known; he was considered an immoral person. This spirit held sway before 130 A.D. with no limitations, a fact which can be accounted for only if the view had been the common one also in the days of Mary and Joseph and even long before their time.

²⁹ibid.

³⁰ibid. " 'al j^ede huppa uqiddusin." Cf. Billerbeck, II, 396.

These conclusions are by no means opposed by the facts, that a) in certain circumstances the copula, although committed, as we would say, with the guilt of a mortal sin, had a legal consequence, namely, the validity of the betrothal; that b) sexual intercourse between the betrothed was not considered adultery; that c) the betrothed woman was "under" her fiancé (*tahtain*),³¹ and was called his "wife" (*išto*),³² while he was her "lord" *ba'la*.³³

The future husband, while only betrothed, exercised more rights over his intended than is the case with betrothed Christian people of Western culture; but his dominion over her was by no means unlimited as compared with that of a married man. In several respects only was he on an equal footing with the married man. If his bride had lapsed with another man, she was treated as an adulteress;³⁴ if her fiancé died, she became a regular widow,³⁵ and a *haluça* respectively. She could be dismissed from being betrothed only by a letter of divorce,³⁶ in which case her fiancé lost his *k'thubba* (the endowment conferred on his wife) to her father, as did, in a similar case, a married man.³⁷ In spite of such a close legal bond the girl was not under her fiancé as to her vows; she was never allowed to be alone with him, as we have seen; she did not acquire money for him, if she earned any.

The dominion of the bridegroom, therefore, did not extend over economical and financial matters of his bride, but concerned only her sexual life, and this in the negative sense of forbidding her to anyone else, as if she were his wife. All the rights were reserved to him, with the injunction not to use them before his marriage—a full and strict *ius ad rem*, but without the *ius in re*. In every other concern the girl continued to be under the tutelage of her own family.

³¹For instance, K^othuboth, 11b.

³²T K^othuboth, 8, 1 (270) and elsewhere.

³³As in N^odarim, 10, 5.

³⁴Sanhedrin, 7, 4.

³⁵K^othuboth, 1, 2.

³⁶K^oth., 1, 2.

³⁷K^oth., 4, 2. Cf. Billerbeck, II, 393-394.

From what we have so far seen, the term in Mt. 1, 18, "before they came together," becomes clear beyond all doubt. As it is there applied to betrothed people, for a Jewish reader of Saint Matthew's time it could only convey the meaning: before they began to live a common life after their marriage.³⁸ By no means did this expression imply: before they had intercourse, whether as betrothed or married people. Billerbeck is fully justified in considering *come together* as synonymous with the *take unto* of Mt. 1, 20.³⁹

II. MARY AS A SPOUSE

For the understanding of the following inquiries it will be helpful to make a few remarks about Mary's age at the time of her betrothal, and about the duration of her engagement.

As to Mary's age at her betrothal we must take for granted the *communiter contingentia* which have formed the basis of the rabbinic legislation of the Mishna. Until someone proves that things were different with Mary, we are fully entitled to do this; nor is there any reason to plead ignorance, provided we leave something of a margin in our calculations since, strictly speaking, things could have been different. But, without any special reason, to follow such a course instead of accepting as most probable what can be proved to have been the ordinary conditions is utterly unwise.

According to the customs of her time and country, Mary, at her betrothal with Joseph, was between twelve and twelve and one-half years old. The Mishna distinguishes the girl of minor age (*k'tanna*) and the girl of major age (*g'edula*).⁴⁰ On the girl of major age the first signs of maturity had already become visible. Hence the rule: "A young woman who has produced the first signs of maturity⁴¹ is obliged to fulfill all the commandments mentioned in the Thora."⁴² This ritual

³⁸Compare Th. Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthæus*², p. 71, annot. 38.

³⁹I, 45; also Lagrange and other exegetes.

⁴⁰So in J^obamoth, 13, 7-12.

⁴¹the s^oaroth.

⁴²Nidda, 6, 11.

maturity was attained when the girl was twelve years and one day old;⁴⁸ she was then called a *na'ara*. She was supposed to reach full physical maturity after six months;⁴⁴ a girl from the age of twelve and one-half years on was "marriageable" (*bugereth*).⁴⁵

At an earlier period even a girl of minor age could be betrothed; the Jewish sources sometimes refer to it.⁴⁶ In view of this it is not surprising that the ordinary age of betrothal for the girl was the period when she was a *na'ara*, when she was twelve to twelve and one-half years old. Practically the whole legislation of the Mishnic epoch is based on this assumption, which "proves better than anything that the age of the *na'ara* has been the usual age of a woman at her betrothal."⁴⁷

Rabh, like other rabbis, was opposed to surrendering a girl of minor age in betrothal; the girl should be full-grown,⁴⁸ and able to judge and to say: "I like this man;" she should be fully aware of her consent to her father's proposition.⁴⁹ On the other hand later rabbis thought they had good reason to insist upon the Mishnic law, that a girl should be betrothed at the age of twelve to twelve and one-half years. "To him who leads his sons and daughters on the right way and has them betrothed when their maturity is near, Scripture says: And thou shalt experience that thy tent is full of peace. . . ."⁵⁰

When a *na'ara* came to her full maturity without being betrothed, it was deemed necessary to lose no time. "When your daughter has become marriageable, free your bondsman

⁴⁸Nidda, 5, 6; Qiddushin, 81b.

⁴⁴"Between the time when a girl has become a *na'ara* and her full maturity (Ben j'moth ha-na'aruth limoth ha-bagruth) are only six months." p J⁶bamoth, 1, 3a; Nidda, 65a.

⁴⁵Billerbeck, II, 374.

⁴⁶Billerbeck, II, 374-375.

⁴⁷Billerbeck, II, 374c. Also in the *Protoevangelium Jacobi* (early second century) 8, 2, Mary is given into betrothal "when she was twelve years old." In later apocryphal books she is made 14 years of age.

⁴⁸Al Iethagdel.

⁴⁹Qiddushin, 41a.

⁵⁰J⁶bamoth, 62b; Sandhedrin, 76b; see Billerbeck, II, 374.

and give her to him" [in order that she should be married at any rate].⁵¹ R. Papa (died 375 A.D.) went so far as to demand that if a girl was already thirteen and one-half years old and not betrothed, the period of her engagement should be cut down from twelve months to thirty days, which was the period of engagement of a widow.⁵² He who, on the contrary, did not want to betroth his marriageable daughter for sheer selfishness, was called a villain.⁵³

Here again, as in the foregoing chapter, we perceive a century-old custom (*cf. Ecclesiasticus* 42, 9) which, in the course of time, took shape in these various laws and counsels. It is hardly possible to doubt that in the first century B. C., the betrothal ordinarily took place when the girl was but a *na'ara* nearing her full womanhood.

2. The period of engagement in the case of a *na'ara* lasted a full year. "From the time when her lord (*ba-ba'al*) asks her to become his wife, a virgin is granted twelve months, in order that she may see to her trousseau."⁵⁴ This economical reason was neither the only nor the principal reason for this duration of the engagement. If a girl was betrothed at the age of twelve to twelve and one-half, she was like a bud just beginning to unfold. The twelve months were a protection for her; only when she had grown into full womanhood could her marriage take place. There is every reason to admit that Mary, too, was betrothed when she was between twelve and twelve and one-half years old, and that she lived for a full year as a betrothed girl.

⁵¹Pesahim, 113b, for a word of R. J^ohošua' ben Levi (circa 250 A.D.) expressing the view of the rabbis of Jerusalem. In modern times, according to Hilma Granquist, *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village*, I, 38, the marriageable age for men and women is "shortly after puberty."

⁵²K^othuboth, 57b.

⁵³Sanhedrin, 76a.

⁵⁴K^othuboth, 5, 2; similar passages are quoted by Billerbeck, II, 397-398; see also annotations 71 and 72.

III. "HOW SHALL THIS BE DONE, BECAUSE I KNOW NOT MAN?" Lk 1, 34.

The results of the first two chapters help us to understand the answer which Mary gave to the Angel Gabriel when he had delivered to her the message from the Most High. (Lk. 1, 30-33). This message was not only a statement of what was going to happen, but implied a task assigned to her.⁵⁵

The forms "thou shalt conceive" . . . "shalt bring forth" . . . "shalt call" are in the future tense, but, as often in Hebrew, they mean the same as do imperative forms, as for instance the words of the decalogue quoted by Jesus "thou shalt not kill," etc. (Mt. 19, 18). The first two terms did not, of course, imply any activity on the part of the Virgin;⁵⁶ at the same time, they conveyed God's request, to which she should give her consent.

Both the Angel and Mary understood the message as referring to the imminent future, such as would be almost simultaneous with the message itself.

Had it been otherwise, and had the message concerned a later date, one would have expected an indication of time. The word of Gabriel to Zachary was similarly in the future tense, although its fulfillment began at the very moment when the word was spoken: "And behold, thou shalt be dumb, and shalt not be able to speak until the day wherein these things shall come to pass." (Lk. 1, 20). Mary answered in the present tense: ". . . because I know not man." The events themselves afford a confirmation. Soon after Gabriel's message Mary started on her journey to Elizabeth (see the following chapter), being already the mother of the Saviour (Lk. 1, 42-43). St. Luke's written source of chapters 1-2 did not mention when the miraculous conception of Jesus took place,—one of the many signs of the modest reserve of this source. But it must needs have occurred a very short time after the Angel had left Mary.

⁵⁵See Lagrange *ad locum*.

⁵⁶Compare Gen. 16, 11; Jud. 13, 3; Is. 7, 14.

Mary's word "How shall this be done, because I know not man?" (Lk. 1, 34) caused the Angel to explain his message. He emphasized three expressions: "the Holy Ghost" that should come upon her, "the power of the Most High" that should overshadow her, and the "Son of God" whom she should bear. These expressions are clearly opposed to the expression "man," to whom Mary had referred. The answer, therefore, agrees with the Virgin's question "How shall this be done?" She had thought of becoming a mother in a natural way, by a man, her future husband. Her answer seems to have even more fully expressed her actual condition. As the Angel's message referred to the imminent future, and as Mary was in a position which made sexual intercourse a most unseemly action, the exact motive which she gave to her question appears to have been this: I am now only betrothed, not yet married, and can see no way of becoming a mother now. Several reasons recommend this view. Her answer taken in this sense perfectly agrees with, and reflects the state of life in which she was then. It moreover fits neatly into the whole conversation between her and the Angel. Thirdly, her religious attitude is far better explained.

This third point leads us to a famous question. Since the times of the Fathers of the Church it has often been maintained, and in fact is the most common opinion among Catholic scholars, that Mary's answer "because I know not man" implied that she had made a *vow of perpetual virginity*.⁵⁷ Although in doing so Our Lady would have gone far beyond anything done by the pious in her day, yet under the special guidance of the Holy Ghost such a step was certainly possible. It is a *quaestio facti*.

And it seems that without assuming a vow we can explain the Scripture text better. Suppose Mary had made a vow; would not the message of the Angel have implied that God

⁵⁷Editor's Note: For the argument from Lk. 1, 34 in favor of concluding to the vow of Our Lady, one may consult the summary of P. Jouon's article on the text under the *Current Theology* of the February (1941) issue of THEOLOGICAL STUDIES under *Mariology*.

wished to dispense her from it? Or would Mary, understanding the message as she did understand it at first, from the natural point of view, have preferred her vow, which depended entirely on her own free will, to a Divine request which seemed to involve something contrary to her vow? This seems very unlikely, and, in consequence, if Mary had made the vow, she would hardly have considered it and brought it forward as an obstacle to her prompt submission to God's order. But if she was rather concerned about something commonly considered sinful, her question was much more intelligible; because without any explicit statement she could not easily guess that God, for this one case, wished to exempt her from all guilt. Certainly she might have assumed that Gabriel knew exactly what her state of life was; but a tender conscience and a great love for purity made her question quite natural. In order to submit to a request seeming to involve something which in all other circumstances would have meant a sin, she needed an explicit statement of the Angel.

There is still another point which recommends our solution. Her marriage had been fixed by her father, as was, and still is, genuine oriental custom. Mary had to give her consent. How could she in good conscience do so, having made a vow contrary to the very essence of marriage? This indeed is hard to conceive, unless one credits her with such subtle knowledge and such distinctions as were destined to be the result of much hard thinking more than a thousand years later. To attribute them to Mary would require far stronger proofs than Lk. 1, 34 is apt to yield. The solution proposed here is not only in perfect accord with the historical conditions of Mary's time and country, but also fits into the text of Luke's report and is in itself more obvious and simple.

Finally, we may remind ourselves that Lk. 1-2 was originally drafted for oriental readers. Vows of perpetual virginity were unheard-of things in those days. None of the Jewish readers could have surmised that Lk. 1, 34 hinted at such a vow. Had the author intended to refer to it, he would undoubtedly have

made Mary's strange disposition clear. As an *argumentum e silentio* this reason is not, by itself, decisive; but in conjunction with the other arguments it is not without its merits.

It may be remarked that the traditional view that Lk. 1, 34 refers to a vow of perpetual virginity is by no means binding. Neither has it ever been put forward as a point of faith, nor does the opposite opinion depreciate any dogma. The considerations offered above are drawn from historical sources, and from inferences which are deduced from them. The same conclusions have also been proposed by Donatus Haugg in his *Das erste biblische Marienwort* (Stuttgart, 1938).

IV. THE VISITATION. LK. 1, 39-40.

Our inquiry now carries us to Mary's journey to Elizabeth, an important point, if we wish to assign the proper time to every event in that memorable year. What were the thoughts that caused Mary to visit her cousin? How could she obtain leave? What do we know about the preparations, and the time of her journey, and the journey itself?

1. MARY'S DISPOSITION. The miraculous conception of Jesus took place during the period of Mary's engagement, which was, as we have seen, for all pious and law-abiding Jews a period closed to any intimate relation between bride and bridegroom. Accordingly, Mary, for all her trust in God's special Providence, must have been greatly concerned about her virginal honour. This honour was all the more endangered, as she lived in a small village, and among people, some of whom may not have been favourably disposed towards her, as will be seen. If not even Jesus Himself omitted to take natural precautions against dangers that threatened Him, there can be no doubt that Mary's feelings were such as any woman's heart would have experienced, and would experience today, in conditions analogous to hers. Hence her concern about her maiden honour.

The Annunciation had yet another consequence for Mary. After the Angel had disappeared and the conception had taken

place, she was left all by herself, with nothing else to rely upon except the memory of her private experience and her faith in the angel's words. Naturally enough she must have felt the desire to have her personal experience linked up with some event which served as a proof to herself and to other people that she had not been the prey of her own imagination.

Both these exigencies were met by the angel's revelation about Elizabeth: "And behold thy cousin Elizabeth, she also hath conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her that is called barren." (Lk. 1, 36) This statement served several purposes simultaneously. First of all, it strengthened there and then, Mary's faith in the angel's message and the proffered explanation as it was intended to do: "Because no word shall be impossible with God." (Lk. 1, 37) But it also served as a means by which Mary at any time could check the genuineness of the message delivered to her, if there were need to do so. Thirdly, it was this word of the angel which suggested to Mary a visit to Elizabeth. This visit would not only confirm her own experience, but bring her to a place where she would feel safe and sheltered; Elizabeth would understand her better than anyone else and would know best how to protect Mary's honour, if need arose.

2. THE LEAVE FOR MARY'S JOURNEY. The angel's word about Elizabeth seems to have been useful for one more purpose, particularly if we consider it in connexion with Lk. 1, 24: "And [Elizabeth] hid herself five months." Why was it "in the sixth month" of Elizabeth's pregnancy that the angel came to the Virgin? We find an easy solution, if, for a moment, we take the place of Mary. In order to make her journey Mary had to tell at least one person about her secret. She was under the tutelage of her family and could not leave Nazareth at will. Nor would it have served her purpose to say that she had seen an angel and had become the mother of the Messiah; without a strict proof this was too hard to believe no matter how trustworthy she had been considered to be. The revelation about Elizabeth afforded such a proof. No

doubt, it was news to Mary and her family, although Elizabeth had come forth again from her seclusion after five months. And this very fact was significant. It made it comparatively easy to check Mary's word, which would not have been the case, if Elizabeth had still been in hiding.

As Mary's secret did not leak out to the villagers, as will be seen, it is unlikely that she confided it to more than one person; the most likely person was her own mother, a suggestion for which we shall give another reason later. Not only may her mother have been the one who was more congenial to Mary than any one else in the family, but it was presumably on her mother's side, that Mary and Elizabeth were relatives. This was another reason why Mary should confide her secret to her. From this point of view also, the revelation about Elizabeth was most aptly chosen to prove Mary's report, as it concerned Mary's mother personally. That it was a revelation to both Mary and her mother is obvious from the words of Gabriel: "And behold," that is, I tell you something you do not yet know. . . .

If in the reconstruction of the story we thus have recourse to Mary's mother, the obtaining of leave for Mary's journey must appear the easier; for mother and daughter together would with greater facility obtain what any father would have flatly refused to a daughter who was little more than a child. It was by no means a matter of course that a girl of about thirteen should undertake a journey of three, if not four days.

3. THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE JOURNEY. For such a journey preparations were necessary. Money had to be provided (then as nowadays), and suitable company had to be sought. For this reason also it was necessary to settle beforehand how long Mary was going to stay with Elizabeth. That is, it had at least to be ascertained if Elizabeth could find good company for Mary on her homeward journey. But very likely this alone was not enough; the duration of her sojourn had to be determined, if for no other reason, for Joseph's sake. Being

already the "lord" (*ba'al*) of Mary, he had to be informed about her journey, and had to give his consent. Mary, being Joseph's "wife," could not of her own accord, absent herself from Nazareth without his consent, nor stay away for an indefinite period.

Does it mean to give unwarranted place to the imagination, if we call attention to such exigencies of real life? As far as the travelling of women is concerned, we can somewhat substantiate these exigencies. Jewish views with regard to women, in accordance with the whole Orient, ancient and modern, were rather strict. "A disciple of the wise men must not talk to a woman on the road . . . even if she is his wife, or daughter or sister, because not everybody knows who his relations are."⁵⁸ A mishna has it: "One man must not be alone with two women, but one woman is allowed to be alone with two men. R. Simeon (ben Johai, circa 150 A.D.) said: Also one man is allowed to be alone with two women, if his wife is with him. . . . A man is allowed to stay alone with his mother and with his daughter."⁵⁹ Elsewhere we read: "It is not permissible to be alone in an inn with a woman, not even with one's sister or daughter, because of the thoughts of men."⁶⁰ Married people could, of course, be overnight in an inn.⁶¹ The general view which underlies these regulations makes it sufficiently clear, that for Mary's journey a company of at least one woman and one man (on account of the dangers) had to be found. She had to wait, until a group of pilgrims started for the Holy City, or some mixed caravan went southward.

4. THE TIME OF MARY'S DEPARTURE. Hence the question, when did Mary start on her journey? Three points are to be considered here: a somewhat vague indication of time in Lk. 1, 39; the remarks about Elizabeth being in her sixth month, at the time when the angel appeared to Mary; and the necessity of finding suitable company for her journey.

⁵⁸B^erakhoth, 43b; other passages in Billerbeck, I, 299-301.

⁵⁹Qiddušin, 4, 12.

⁶⁰Aboth de R. Nathan, 2 (1d); Billerbeck, II, 438.

⁶¹Qiddušin, 4, 12.

Lk. 1, 39 contains the following: "And Mary rising up in those days." ἀναστᾶσα δὲ Μαριάμ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ταύταις. ἀναστᾶς *rising up* with the finite verb following renders both the Hebrew *wajjagom we* and the Aramaic *gam we*.⁶² If it expresses an order, and if it is exactly, or nearly so, repeated, to describe the execution, it indicates an immediate sequence of time. So, for instance, Lk. 6, 8, "Arise and stand forth . . . and rising (=gotten up) he stood forth." ἔγειρε καὶ στῆθι. . . . καὶ ἀναστᾶς (=ἐγεγρῆεις) ἔστη This, however, is not the case in Lk. 1, 39. Moreover, *arising* in cases like Lk. 6, 8 means bodily rising. Where this sense is absent as in Lk. 1, 39, it only indicates a transition from the state of comparative inertia to a state of activity.⁶³ Such is the meaning in Lk. 1, 39; there, moreover, the Greek adversative particle serves as a sign of a new section in the narrative. There remains then nothing to indicate the time than the words "in those days."⁶⁴ Their meaning is rather vague; it leaves a margin for any number of days required by the circumstances, provided that what is recounted in 1, 39 ff. is placed within the same period as the preceding event.

This period is implied in the two indications of time in Lk. 1, 26 "And in the sixth month" (of Elizabeth's pregnancy) and in Lk. 1, 56 "And Mary abode with her (Elizabeth) about three months." Put together these two terms lead to the approximate time of St. John's birth, which is hardly accidental. If it was intended by the author, Mary must have left Nazareth soon after the Annunciation, so soon at any rate, that less than a month and probably less than half a month elapsed in between.

How much time was required to find for Mary suitable companions for her journey, we cannot say. The vague temporal connection of Lk. 1, 39 with the preceding pericope,

⁶²G. Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu*², Leipzig, 1930, pp. 18-19.

⁶³Thus in Lk. 15, 18 and 20; Acts, L, 15; 5, 17, etc.

⁶⁴An exact parallel is Acts 1, 15, "In those days Peter rising up in the midst of the brethren, said."

seems to exclude the happy chance of finding them at once. If we assume some eight to ten days or two weeks, we keep within reasonable limits making allowance for comparatively favourable circumstances. At the same time we meet the exigencies of the six and three months just mentioned.

The six month of Elizabeth's being with child was, therefore, filled up in this way: Some days of it may have passed before Gabriel visited Mary; about a fortnight passed by in preparing her journey; about four days were spent on the journey; a few days at the end of the sixth month Mary spent with Elizabeth. There she remained "about three months," namely the remaining few days of Elizabeth's sixth month, then three more months, and another few days till John was born.

Mary made her journey "with haste." (Lk. 1, 39) No doubt she was anxious to meet her cousin. But this does not seem to be what the author wanted precisely to express. By this remark he certainly excluded any intermediate stations. If so, Mary had hardly joined pilgrims who went to Jerusalem for one of the three great feasts, Pasch, Pentecost, or the feast of the Tabernacles. In this case it would be hard to conceive why she should have missed fulfilling the ritual prescribed by the Law and anxiously observed by the pious Jewesses. Mary was, moreover, anxious to protect herself against possible slander that might arise later; the more stations she made on her journey, the more occasions she gave the slanderous tongues. It was perhaps this idea which the author wished to indicate.

V. MARY'S RETURN TO NAZARETH. LK. 1, 56

1. THE DURATION OF THE VISIT. Mary stayed with Elizabeth till the time when John was born. The authors, however, do not agree in their views whether she was still there when the birth took place, or had left Elizabeth shortly before that. The second view, in our opinion, hardly does justice to the Gospel report.

It is quite true that the Gospel does not mention Mary at all where the birth of John the Baptist is recounted. Besides,

oriental customs required that Mary, being a maiden, was not to be present at the birth. But neither of these two reasons prove that Mary, by then, had already returned to Nazareth. It is in accordance with the literary manner of Luke, first, to finish off a report concerning the mother of Jesus before he begins one concerning John, although chronologically the end of the first should have found its place after the beginning of the second.⁶⁵ The second reason has been emphasized since the time of the Greek Fathers, but this reason, too, is far from being conclusive. There are exceptions known from Nablous in Palestine.⁶⁶ If the general feeling of decency required that no maiden should be present at the birth, it was sufficient for Mary to stay away from the mother's room, or if necessary, from her house, until the baby had safely arrived.

That Mary did not leave Elizabeth before her confinement is suggested by the very word of the Angel Gabriel to Mary: Elizabeth "hath conceived a son." How was Mary to know this, if she left her cousin before the birth of the child? The Angel's word was meant to strengthen Mary's faith, as it contained a prophecy that the child should be a boy. It was undoubtedly the reason why she had been allowed to visit Elizabeth. If so, it was her task to report to her own family about the child. The one natural thing for Mary to do was to wait until the child was born.

2. THE TIME OF MARY'S DEPARTURE. The real problem in this matter, however, lies elsewhere. Why did Mary leave Elizabeth soon after her confinement (or, as some wish it, shortly before)? The reason cannot have been either with Elizabeth or with Mary herself. Mary must have been on more intimate terms with her cousin than with any one else; this conclusion is suggested by the analogous supernatural experience of both women and by the salutation of Elizabeth (Lk. 1, 40-45). Moreover the house and place where Zachary

⁶⁵See, for instance, P. Gaechter, *Summa Introductionis in Novum Testamentum*, Innsbruck, 1938, p. 90.

⁶⁶J. A. Jaussen, O. P., *Naplouse et son District (Coutumes Palestiniennes, I)* Paris, 1927, p. 33, note 1: "L'accouchement se fait devant la famille entière."

lived, provided for Mary a better protection than even her home at Nazareth. There she could live free from any suspicion and gossip; at Nazareth she would have been more and more in danger of slander.

The *Magnificat* seems to indicate that Mary, young in years though she was, had already experienced hostilities from other womenfolk. When she, inspired by the Holy Ghost, burst into the jubilant song, she was no doubt influenced by the well-known song of Anna, the mother of Samuel. But a further reason has to be sought for the actual choice of words which form the *Magnificat*; the canticle of Anna might have suggested many others. Why did Mary feel moved to sing: "He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble . . . and the rich He hath sent away empty" (Lk. 1, 51-53)? The whole of the *Magnificat* is like a rush of water held back for a long time, and then suddenly finding its way through a bursting dam. Words like these must be considered also as a result of experiences which, in the past, had left an unforgettable impression on her heart. The repressed feelings which had naturally accompanied such an impression in the *Magnificat* now found their noble and religious outlet. Considered from this point of view, they reveal mental sufferings of previous years which can only have been caused by evil-minded tongues. In all likelihood Mary had gone through such a painful experience at Nazareth. She was not like other girls; her reserve, as we know it from Holy Scripture, with moral necessity must have roused opposition and reviling talk.⁶⁷ If this view is justified, the holy Virgin must have shuddered at the thought of what would be the result, if certain Nazarite girls and women discovered that she had become a mother before her wedding.

As far as we can reconstruct Mary's situation, we cannot but think that the Virgin stayed with Elizabeth as long as possible. Why then did she leave her immediately after John's

⁶⁷F. M. William, *Das Leben Marias, der Mutter Jesu*, Freiburg, 1936, p. 17, has proposed a fine psychological study on this point.

birth? The time chosen for her departure is all the more surprising, as Elizabeth, too, on her part must have desired to have Mary near her as long as possible, particularly after her confinement. Her baby needed tending and so did Elizabeth herself. It was her first child and Elizabeth was "well advanced in years." (Lk. 1, 7) The physical consequences of such a birth were far greater for her than for a woman in the prime of life; there is absolutely no reason why Elizabeth should not have been subjected to these laws of nature. Again, why did Mary leave her then and there?

The conclusion suggested by these deliberations is this: The date of departure did not depend either on Mary or on Elizabeth. It was, in all probability, Mary's family who willed it so. But even this solution does not answer our question in full. They too, being sensible people, must have foreseen what it meant to both the Virgin and to Elizabeth to have Mary returning in such circumstances. There was something in the conditions concerning Mary and her family that caused such a decision, some factor which was independent of them. As a solution we can only offer here a suggestion which we shall, however, be able to confirm subsequently.

The factor in the conditions which fixed the time of Mary's departure from Elizabeth, and which neither the two women nor any one of Mary's family was able to change and to adapt to personal desires was Mary's period of engagement. By the date of Mary's betrothal the time, if not the day, of her wedding became fixed, as will be seen shortly. If we suppose that the day of Mary's wedding drew near, we fully understand the puzzle of her departure. Mary was bound to leave Elizabeth by that time. On the other hand, that she returned immediately after Elizabeth's confinement and against her own and Elizabeth's natural desire suggests that Mary had remained with Elizabeth to the last possible day. She would, of course, be back at Nazareth at a date early enough to allow her to make what final preparations were necessary, that is to say, some days before her marriage, perhaps a week or two.

[To be continued]