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Short Note

Mary, Espoused To Joseph

By J. Harold Greenlee

In the three New Testament (NT) references to the relationship between Mary and Joseph—the angel's announcement to Joseph (Matthew 1:18), the angel's announcement to Mary (Luke 1:27), and their journey to Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:5)—the relationship is expressed by the participle of the Greek verb *mnēsteuomai*. The lexicons state that this verb refers to betrothal, being promised in marriage, but that in NT times betrothal was the virtual equivalent of marriage and could be broken only by divorce.

This is doubtless true; however, the context of Mary and Joseph's relationship makes it clear that they were married when Mary became pregnant. Yet virtually none of the common NT versions recognizes this fact except the King James Version (KJV), which translates this Greek word as "espoused," meaning that Mary was a "spouse," a wife.

What, then, is the correct meaning of *mnēsteuomai* in this relationship? Let us read the Greek text:[1] Matthew 1:19, "…Joseph her husband…planned to divorce her"; in verse 20 the angel tells Joseph, "…do not be afraid to receive your wife"; and in verse 24, "he received his wife" (underlining added). So *mnēsteuomai* in this account clearly means pledged in marriage—legally married—but the marriage not yet consummated. Yet the New International Version (NIV) translates these two passages as (verse 20) "take Mary *home* as your wife;" and in verse 24 "took *Mary home as* his wife." The italicized words are not in the Greek text, and were added intentionally to indicate that she was not already his wife. Other versions misconstrue this passage as badly or worse. One version adds that Joseph now married her![2] So *mnēsteuomai* in this account clearly means "pledged in marriage—legally married—but the marriage not yet consummated." There is no indication that any further ceremony occurred.

In Luke 2:5 *mnēsteuomai* is used of their relationship when they journeyed to Bethlehem. They had been living together as husband and wife for months! Most translations, it is clear, let the supposed lexical meaning of the Greek verb overrule the plain sense of the context rather than letting the context determine the meaning of the Greek verb.

Mary, in Luke 1:34, tells the angel, "I do not know (have a sexual relationship with) a man"; she does not say that she is not married. Likewise, Matthew 1:25 states that Joseph "did not know her until she bore a son."

If it had been discovered that Mary was pregnant and was not married to Joseph—the idea of a miraculous birth would have been considered nonsense or worse—Mary would have lived under a cloud for life, and Jesus would have had no possibility of becoming a rabbi. Almost certainly, no one except Mary and Joseph ever had any thought other than that Jesus was the legitimate son of Mary and Joseph. Is it possible that the miraculous secret was finally divulged by Mary during the ten days of prayer before Pentecost, to keep the knowledge of the virgin birth from dying with her forever? Only then could such a miracle have been believable.

J. Harold Greenlee, a retired missionary of One Mission Society (formerly OMS International), is the author of more than a dozen books and more than 150 articles, mostly pertaining to New Testament Greek, including A Concise Exegetical Grammar of New Testament Greek *(1963, 1986), his classic textbook,* Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism *(1964, 1995), and his most recent book,* The Text of the New Testament: From Manuscript to Modern Edition *(2008).*

[1] Author's translation, with underlining added.
[2] *Today's English Version*, 1966 ed. "…he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do and he married Mary."