

Women's status in the ancient Hebrew culture was considerably different from the way it is in our western cultures of today. Women were to be protected by a father, husband, brother or trusted man in the extended family. This restricted their movement within the community. If they were away from the home, they were required to be with their male protector or with a group of women and/or children (under the age of puberty). Homes – the domain of the women – were constructed so as to shield prying eyes from seeing what went on within the homes and courtyards.

Unmarried girls over the age of 12 were especially watched to protect their honor from being harmed. The honor of a girl was very important in order to be betrothed to a good husband. Once betrothed, she would still not be with her husband for up to a year, due to marriage customs in this culture, and still needed the protection from the male members of her birth family.

Any number of things could reduce that honor or destroy it completely. As in the case of becoming pregnant it could result in the annulment of the betrothal, ending in a shameful divorce, or even death by stoning.

Betrothals (*erusin*) in this culture are very different than in our modern times. It totally misses the mark to consider these betrothals the same as our engagements. A betrothal was a covenant (*ketubah*) between two families. As in all covenants, two witnesses were required to verify the consent to the betrothal covenant.

These were usually arranged by the mothers of the two families and ratified by the fathers and ultimately by the patriarch of the clan. The purpose of the marriage was to solidify the relationship between the two families. Love (in the emotional sense) was not generally a concern although many parents would take into account whether the two would be compatible. Since the marriages were generally within local extended family groups the man and the woman probably at least knew each other, and were often first cousins.

The purpose for the delay between the betrothal and the actual consummation of the marriage was to allow time for the husband to build and ready the home and for the wife to prepare the contents for their new home.

The husband would normally build the home near or attached to his father's home, and the new wife would ultimately leave her family become a part of his family.

As we begin with the story of Mary & Joseph (Miryam and Yosef) in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we are told: *Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.* Luke 1:26-27 (NKJV)

From these two verses and knowledge of the culture we can gain a great deal of information.

1. We find that they are already betrothed to each other. Meaning the covenant has been made and that they are likely cousins or at least from the same clan or tribe.
2. We know that Mary is young likely between 12 and 14 since she is called a virgin. Also that she has not been married before.
3. Likely Joseph is a couple of years older.
4. They are both in the processes of setting up a household in which to build a family.
5. Since Matthew has just gone through a lengthy genealogy and Luke will follow with one in his chapter 3, we know that they are both from the lineage of King David. Further, that they are probably from the same extended family means both families can trace their ancestors back to King David.
6. They live in the city of Nazareth, which was a very small village near the Plain of Esdraelon in the area lower Galilee. Esdraelon is the Greek derivation of the Hebrew *Yizre'el*, meaning "God will sow" or "May God make fruitful," an allusion to the fertility of the area.

As we follow this story through the Advent season, it would be advantageous to remember the cultural information here and not try to interpret it from our own cultural norms, as many have done in the past.

These are Jewish people living in a fractured Jewish culture ruled by Roman politicians in a land permeated by the Greek culture. It's a mess, but that is what God determined to be the best time to send our Messiah.