

According to Scripture and Tradition – How Old Was Mary at the Birth of Christ?

Sources: Luke 1 and the Proto Evangelium (The Infancy Gospel of James)

Proto Evangelium (also called “Protevangelion”)

Ch 8

(3) When she (*Mary*) turned twelve, a group of priests took counsel together, saying, "Look, Mary has been in the temple of the Lord twelve years. (4) What should we do about her now, so that she does not defile the sanctuary of the Lord our God?" ...

(6) And the priest went in taking the vestment with twelve bells into the holy of holies and prayed about her. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord stood before him, saying, "Zachariah, Zachariah, depart from here and gather the widowers of the people and let each one carry a staff.

Ch 9

(11) Fearing God, Joseph took her into his own possession. (12) And he said to her, "Mary, I took you from the temple of the Lord and now I bring you into my house. I am going out to build houses, but I will come back to you. The Lord will protect you."

Note: Joseph's taking of Mary "into his own possession" was likely the beginning of a traditionally year or more-long process where the couple lived apart from one another before the wedding feast. During this betrothal period, the bride was to maintain her purity while the groom made preparation (Ephesians 5:26-27). This is also when the bride would be trained and prepared to take on the role of a wife. She would thus prepare herself to be a fitting bride for her mate (2Corinthians 11:2). Although Joseph's reference to taking Mary as "his own possession" may be a historical reference to the consummation of the betrothal period, Joseph's announcement of his departure is entirely reminiscent of the beginning of such a betrothal period (John 14:6). Per the customs of the time, the betrothed was already regarded as the wife of her husband (and hence "his own possession"). The normal custom would be for the bride to wait in her own home until the wedding feast while the groom prepared a place for her. However, since Mary lived in the temple, this aspect of the tradition was trumped by the priest's concern not to defile the temple (through the onset of menstruation). Since Joseph was already an older and successful widower who had no need to prepare a home, and since he was leaving to build houses (possibly in Sepphoris, ~4 miles north of Nazareth, the provincial capital of Galilee and the traditional birth place of Mary), Mary could still maintain her purity apart from Joseph while living in his home.

Ch 10

(1) Meanwhile (*i.e.*, around the time when Joseph departed from Mary), the priests were meeting together, saying, "Let us make a curtain for the temple of the Lord." ...

(8) And Mary was appointed by lot to the true purple and scarlet threads. And taking them, she went to her house. (9) This was at the same time Zachariah fell silent and Samuel replaced him until Zachariah could speak again.

Luke 1

From the Luke 1:13 & 24 we know Zachariah fell silent just before the time John the Baptist was conceived. We also know from Luke 1:26 & 36, John was conceived six months prior to the annunciation/conception of Jesus.

Discussion

As stated in the Infancy Gospel, the chronological clock starts when Mary turned twelve years of age. Per the custom of the day (apart from the concern of the priests about the temple being defiled due to uncleanness) it was not unusual for betrothal to take place at this age. The Infancy Gospel relates the choice of a spouse for Mary was ordained by a special revelation from God and is reminiscent of what took place in Numbers 17. Time lapse from the time Mary turned twelve involved, first communication time to the widowers of Israel and then, response time for the widowers traveling to Jerusalem for the lot procedure. This is the most ambiguous aspect of the chronological calculation. Let's simply guess this process took between three to nine months. We are told that, although Joseph resisted, he "feared God" and so "Joseph took her into his own possession." Thus, once the actual spousal choice was made it marked the beginning of the betrothal period. At that time, Mary was anywhere from twelve years, three months - to twelve years, nine months old.

There is another lapse of time during the betrothal period. This period could customarily take a year or more (possibly several years). On one hand, there was no need for time from Joseph's perspective. He had a home and so had no need to prepare (at least in a material sense). However, there would also be no need to rush the process. After all, Mary served in the temple as a consecrated virgin. Thus, the elderly widower, Joseph, accepted his mission. He had no intention of violating her vow and consummating the marriage sexually.

There is, however, a specific time reference supplied from the text of the Infancy Gospel. Ch 10 relates that Mary was appointed to spin the scarlet yarn for the temple veil at about the time when Zechariah is silenced (which is about the time John is conceived).

Ch 11 of the Infancy Gospel also tells us it was during this time that the Annunciation occurred. Mary's consent, at the time of the annunciation, is traditionally regarded as the time when the Christ child was conceived in Mary's womb.

Luke 1:26 & 36 tells us the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in Elizabeth's sixth month.

Thus, six months elapsed after the Mary's betrothal - at the time of the silencing of Zechariah & conception of John - at which (six month) point Jesus was conceived.

So, when Jesus was conceived, Mary was anywhere from twelve years, nine months - to thirteen years, three months old.

Finally, by the time Jesus Christ was born, nine months later, Mary was anywhere from thirteen and a half years - to fourteen years old. This conclusion is also in accord with the scant other tradition that exists regarding these events (c.f. references in the Wiki entry for "Mary, mother of Jesus").

For more chronological information regarding the birth of Christ see my Friday, December 29, 2017 post: [Matthew 2:1-23](#).