

The Betrothal of Mary and Joseph in the Bible

With Christmas around the corner, many people read the Nativity stories in Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2. Tucked into these narratives are the engagement and marriage of Mary and Joseph in the Bible (Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–27; 2:5). Any reader would recognize immediately that elements of their courtship were extraordinary. Yet other aspects were quite ordinary, reflecting the cultural norms of that time, people, and place—first-century Jews in Galilee.

David A. Fiensy invites readers to a first-century Jewish wedding in his article, “[Wedding Bells in Galilee?](#)”—published in the [Winter 2022 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*](#). He explores Jewish courtships in the first century and provides insight into the engagement and marriage of Mary and Joseph in the Bible. Dust off your copy of **BAR**, put on your dancing shoes, and join him!

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In his **BAR** article, Fiensy discusses first-century Jewish weddings. Here, we highlight five aspects of the courtship process:

1. **Family Ties.** The adage “you marry the family” was even more true in Mary and Joseph’s time than today. Fiensy explains that in the first century, marriages were transactional unions between families. Children did not choose their spouses; rather parents would arrange marriages on behalf of their children. Further, endogamy (marrying close relatives) was likely practiced. Fiensy elaborates:

Endogamy seems to have been the norm in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 28:2), as it is today in the Middle East. There are strong indications that in the late Second Temple period Jewish families preferred their daughters to marry either a cousin or uncle. Therefore, it is probable that Joseph and Mary were relatives.

2. **Betrothal.** The groom would submit a contract—written or oral—to the bride’s family. If the family agreed to its terms, the couple was engaged.

At the time of Mary and Joseph's engagement, the rule of the *ketubbah* would have been in effect. Fiensy describes the *ketubbah*:

In this ruling—not at all hinted at in the Hebrew Bible—the groom pledged a divorce or widow-settlement to be paid to the bride should the marriage dissolve. ... Not only do we have a rabbinic tractate with rules for this process, but we also have marriage contracts from the period. They were discovered in caves on the west side of the Dead Sea and date from the early second century CE. Among these documents are three marriage contracts in which the grooms promise to pay an amount of money to the bride if the marriage dissolves (one promises 400 denarii, equivalent to about \$24,000), confirming that the Mishnaic regulation was in effect.

3. **Marriageable Age.** At the time of their marriage, Mary was probably a teenager—and Joseph not much older. According to rabbinic texts, parents were encouraged to engage their girls around age 12, about the time of puberty, and marry them a year later. Fiensy supports this claim with archaeological evidence; first-century inscriptions that list women's age-at-marriage generally indicate ages 12–17, with the majority at age 13.



Marriage Contract. In this document, Anani requests Meshullam (his future father-in-law) to marry his daughter Tamut. The contract, written in Aramaic on papyrus by Nathan ben Ananiah, dates to July 3, 449 BCE, and comes from Elephantine, Egypt. *Credit: Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Theodora Wilbour from the Collection of Her Father, Charles Edwin Wilbour, 47.218.89 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 47.218.89_Sl1.jpg).*

4. **Engagement Length.** The engagement typically lasted one year.
5. **Wedding.** At last we come to the wedding celebration! Fiensy explains that most first-century Jewish weddings contained a procession from the bride to the groom's house, a large dance party, and a feast:

Local customs varied, but the basic act was carrying the bride to the groom's house on a litter or carriage while people applauded, played music, and perhaps danced in the streets. The bride wore a "crown" of some sort. There might also have been torches or lamps carried by the procession (Matthew 25:1). Upon the bride's arrival at the groom's house, the groom and friends probably emerged with tambourines and drums. ... There was also a wedding feast (John 2:1–10; Matthew 22:2; 25:10; Luke 12:36; 14:8), given by the groom's family, which could last a week or more. ... At some point, somebody uttered a benediction over the couple. The ceremony was a huge event, celebrated by the entire village.

Although no wedding feast is described for Mary and Joseph in the Bible, we should not assume that one did not occur. Matthew 1:24–25 says, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus." In an email to *Bible History Daily*, Fiensy clarifies, "'Took her as his wife' need not mean there was no feast. True it is not mentioned, but culture pressed for it." The historical testimonies suggest some sort of wedding celebration would have taken place—even given the extraordinary circumstances of Mary and Joseph's courtship.

Learn more about first-century Jewish weddings in David A. Fiensy's article "Wedding Bells in Galilee?" published in the Winter 2022 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, and in his book [*The Archaeology of Daily Life: Ordinary Persons in Late Second Temple Israel*](#) (Cascade, 2020).

Retrieved December 13, 2025 from [The Betrothal of Mary and Joseph in the Bible](#)