

Bethlehem

Act Three

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

Matthew 1:18-19

TOO LITTLE IS SAID ABOUT JOSEPH. Traditionally we give him polite mention at the beginning of the story, picturing him leading his pregnant wife toward Bethlehem, inquiring about lodging, and benignly standing around somewhere in the immediate vicinity during and after the birth. Then Joseph passes out of time and space until we mumble a few words about him apparently dying sometime before Jesus begins His public ministry.

But the Joseph of the Christmas narrative was what we would call today a “stand-up” guy, who could be a role model for anyone wishing to live a life of obedience to God. Just as the earlier, Old Testament Joseph represents an example of unswerving integrity and faith, so too this New Testament version represents faithful and obedient integrity.

Joseph's story in the Matthew gospel

is also reminiscent of that of the patriarch Abraham.

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

Genesis 22:1-3

Every step of the way God expected the husband of Mary—who certainly was not given detailed explanations for all these extraordinary occurrences—to do something based on faith alone.



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And, every time, he obeyed.

Mary, his betrothed (in those days, a level of commitment the same as being married), shows up pregnant before he has slept with her. Instead of divorcing her, leaving her abandoned and disgraced, he believes the angel that tells him the child is the work of the Holy Spirit, and that the child will “save His people from their sins.” Joseph not only accepts this, but does not have relations with his wife until after Jesus is born.

And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took *Mary* as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Matthew 1:24-25

After Jesus is born, the angel tells him that to avoid Jesus being killed by Herod, he is to take the family to Egypt—and Joseph obeys.

Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.” So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt.

Matthew 2:13-14

Later, in Egypt, the angel again brings traveling orders. Herod is dead, so it is now safe to return to Israel. Again, Joseph packs up the family without question, and returns to their homeland.

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, “Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.” So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. *This* was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

Matthew 2:19-23

Because Herod’s son is in charge, the angel tells Joseph to keep going, all the way up to Nazareth, in Galilee, because there Jesus would finally be safe. Joseph obeys, and Jesus is later called the “Nazarene”—referring not so much geographically, but to the despicable sorts that typically emanated from that area.

But I am a worm and not a man,
A reproach of men and despised by the people.

All who see me sneer at me;
They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying,
“Commit yourself to the Lord; let Him deliver him;
Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him.”

Psalms 22:6-8



As I set the kneeling figure in place, I realize that I’ve always been a little cynical about the traditional renditions of this man. In every nativity set I’ve ever seen the man Joseph is pretty much doing the same thing: standing, or kneeling on one knee, gazing down in placid reverence before the child not his own.

I’ve always imagined that the sculptors had it wrong, that this man would have had more powerful, gut-wrenching emotions coursing through him because of all the twists and turns thrown his way. I’ve always imagined him essentially just going along with the events, but in the recesses of his heart angry, hurt, and disappointed.

But I have had it wrong. Joseph is a role model for all of us. Here is a man who obediently listened to his God and did what He said. And I imagine that Joseph *did* kneel before the Child, and worship him as “Immanuel, God with us.”

Here is, indeed, the figure of a “righteous man.”

