

Voices: Joseph: An unsung hero of the Christmas story

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In the way popular media typically depicts the Christmas story, Joseph is virtually a background character, a human prop. His presence in the story is mostly incidental, and he plays little to no direct role in the major events beyond silently doing what he's told.

Of course, it's only natural to pay greater attention to Mary and Jesus. Mary's womb is the site of one of the greatest miracles in all of Scripture—the virgin birth. And Jesus, obviously, is the true star of the show.

Joseph has no lines and makes no further appearances in the Bible. At first glance, he seems like little more than a background character in Scripture. So, it makes sense why he is a background character in popular depictions of the Christmas story.

But Joseph is far from a human prop in the plotline of our Savior's birth. Both who Joseph is and what Joseph does are vital parts of the narrative. Without Joseph, the Christmas story completely falls apart.

Joseph's genealogy

Matthew (in)famously begins his gospel with a lengthy genealogy tracing Jesus's ancestry from Abraham, through David, and down to Jesus himself (1:1-17). The primary purpose of this genealogy is to establish Jesus is "the Son of David" and "the Son of Abraham" (1:1 CSB). Jesus must be from the line of both Abraham and David to be the Messiah.

Notably, Matthew's genealogy is traced through *Joseph* (1:16). Luke also makes sure to point out Joseph is "of the house of David" (1:27, 2:4). Jesus is "the Son of David" and "the Son of Abraham" because he is the son of Joseph.

But isn't the whole point of the Christmas story that Jesus is *not* Joseph's son? Wasn't Jesus conceived in the virgin Mary's womb quite apart from any biological male input, from Joseph or otherwise? Yes. Jesus is not Joseph's biological son. But he doesn't have to be.

As Joseph's *adopted* son, Jesus would be Joseph's heir legally, a legitimate new link in Joseph's genealogical chain. R.T. France and David E. Garland point out in their respective commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew that by accepting Jesus into his household, adopting him and raising him as his own son, Joseph gives Jesus the appropriate legal family pedigree to be the Messiah.

Also, this serves as an interesting parallel between Jesus and Caesar Augustus, who himself inherited the throne of Rome because Julius Caesar adopted him.

Joseph's hometown

In Luke, Jesus is born in Bethlehem because Joseph is from Bethlehem originally. Caesar Augustus issues a decree that the whole Roman empire should be registered for tax purposes, and those being registered must do so in their hometown. Since Joseph is from Bethlehem originally, he packs up and makes his way back home from Nazareth with the pregnant Mary in tow (2:1-5).

While Joseph and Mary are in Bethlehem, Mary gives birth to Jesus (2:6-7). Interestingly, Luke does not point out explicitly that this fulfills the prophecy of Micah 5:2, but Matthew does (2:1-6). Jesus being born in

Bethlehem is necessary for Scripture to be fulfilled.

As with his membership in the line of David, Joseph's being from Bethlehem plays a key role in Jesus fulfilling messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. Had Joseph originally been from a different town, Jesus would not have been born in Bethlehem according to God's word through Micah.

Joseph's righteousness

So far, we have noted only details about Joseph largely outside of his control—his family background and hometown. But neither of these details would matter if it were not for Joseph's character.

In Matthew, when Joseph learns Mary is pregnant, he plans to “divorce her secretly” (1:18-19). There are two reasons for this. First, Matthew points out Joseph is “a righteous man.” He faithfully upholds Old Testament law, which mandates Joseph cannot follow through with his marriage to Mary, since, as far as Joseph knows, Mary either has committed adultery or been violated by another man (Deuteronomy 22:13-29).

Second, however, Matthew points out Joseph doesn't want to “disgrace her publicly.” Even though Joseph certainly is confused and upset about Mary's pregnancy, he does not want to humiliate her publicly. So, he tries to protect her dignity and honor by divorcing her quietly.

By divorcing Mary quietly instead of seeking public adjudication regarding Mary's unexpected pregnancy, Joseph would be forfeiting the bride-price he paid to her family to be able to marry her. Joseph is willing to make a major financial sacrifice simply to protect Mary's honor, as Garland points out.

But as soon as the angel appears to Joseph and explains the situation, Joseph immediately agrees to follow through on the marriage and accept

Jesus into his home (Matthew 1:20-25). Matthew shows us Joseph is both carefully observant of God's word and deeply compassionate—a model human father for the child Jesus.

Joseph's bravery

The last contribution Joseph makes to the story of Christ's infancy happens sometime after Jesus's birth. Joseph takes Jesus and Mary to Egypt to escape Herod's bloodlust (Matthew 2:13-18) and then settles the holy family in Nazareth to avoid Herod's dangerous son Archelaus (2:19-23).

The emphasis in these parts of the story is Herod's cruel violence, the danger to Jesus and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. But keep this in mind: God doesn't just magically teleport the holy family to safety. Rather, God works through Joseph. God tells Joseph to take Jesus and Mary first to Egypt and then to Nazareth.

These would have been long, arduous, dangerous journeys. Even today, with modern technology and without the thread of bloodthirsty dictators, moving your family hundreds of miles and establishing a life for them is incredibly challenging. How much more challenging was it for Joseph, whom God tasks with safely transporting Jesus and Mary and providing for them as the human father of the family?

Joseph may have no lines of dialogue and may not appear in Scripture outside the early chapters of Matthew and Luke, but his humble faithfulness and courage are a key part of God's plan for Jesus' birth. Moreover, Joseph serves as a powerful example for believers today, especially for Christian fathers.

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those of the author.