

# ADAM HAMILTON

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*Author of 24 Hours That Changed the World, The Journey, and The Way*



# FAITHFUL

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CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF  
JOSEPH





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# 1

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## A CARPENTER NAMED JOSEPH

Typically when Christians explore the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus—often during the Advent season—they focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and on Luke’s account of the Christmas story, which is told from her vantage point. But in this little book our focus will be on Joseph, his life, and his role in the birth and life of Jesus. And that means our biblical focus will be on Matthew’s account of Christmas, which is told from Joseph’s vantage point.

No man played a more important role in Jesus’ life than Joseph. Though not Jesus’ biological father, Joseph adopted Jesus as his son. Joseph protected him, provided for him, taught and mentored him.

We don't often hear about Joseph because there is relatively little in the Gospels about him. They contain only a handful of stories about him around the time of Jesus' birth, and a couple of references to Jesus as "Joseph's son" later in the Gospels (the Gospel of Mark doesn't mention him at all). Nor will you find anything about him in the Acts of the Apostles or any of the Epistles.

So we have to read between the lines to fill in the picture of Joseph's life, and to some extent we must use our imagination to connect the bits of information we do find in the Gospels. As we do this, we will find that there's more than meets the eye in the New Testament accounts of Joseph's life.

Though the story of Joseph speaks to everyone, I believe it may speak in particularly important ways to fathers, husbands, stepfathers, grandfathers, and men who have the opportunity to mentor others.

As I've been writing this book, I've been asking some basic questions:

- What can we learn about God from Joseph's story?
- What can we learn about ourselves from Joseph's story?
- How does Joseph shed light on the meaning of the Christmas story?

## **Joseph in the Early Church**

Beginning in the second century, Christians found themselves longing for more information than we find in the Gospels about Jesus' childhood and parents. Some Christians sought to fill in the gaps by writing what scholars call the apocryphal gospels. *Apocrypha* is a Greek word that means obscure or hidden. When we describe a story today as apocryphal, we mean that we don't really know whether it is true.

While Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written in the second half of the first century—between AD 65 and 90—the apocryphal gospels came much later; the earliest seem to have been written around AD 150, and some of them date as late as the fifth century. In other words, the earliest of these books were written approximately 150 years after Jesus was born. Authorship of these “hidden gospels” is usually attributed to a New Testament figure, James or Mary or Peter or Thomas, though the books were written long after these people had died.

Many stories in the apocryphal gospels are fanciful and completely out of character with the Jesus we meet in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Still, it is possible that occasionally some of the apocryphal gospels preserved traditions that were historical, stories that

had been passed down by the church but not included in the canonical gospels.

For example, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (not to be confused with the Gospel of Thomas) is thought to have been written around AD 150. It is a collection of short stories purporting to be about Jesus' life from age five to age twelve, including the story also told in Luke about Jesus being accidentally left by his parents in Jerusalem. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas contains a much larger role for Joseph than we find in the New Testament Gospels. In it, we find Joseph sending Jesus to school to be educated, not common among the children of first-century woodworkers. Joseph attempts to discipline Jesus (grabbing him by the ear at one point!) and often attempts to help Jesus use his powers wisely.

The Infancy Gospel of James (sometimes known as the Protoevangelium of James or simply the Gospel of James) is also thought to have been written around AD 150. It claims to have been written by James, whom the Gospels refer to as one of the brothers of Christ. The book gives us the earliest account of Mary's birth, her childhood, and a particular account of Joseph's age when he married Mary. It suggests that Mary was raised by the priests in the temple courts from the age of three until she was twelve. According to this apocryphal

gospel, the priests sought a husband for Mary among the older widowers from the House of David, with the intention that she be cared for by her husband as a father might care for his daughter or a grandfather for his granddaughter.

As the widowers gathered, each was given a rod or stick. Joseph, himself an elderly widower, took one of these rods, and from it a dove sprang forth and landed on Joseph's head. (Other versions have flowers bloom from the rod.) Hence the priests knew that Joseph was chosen by God to be Mary's husband. The account is legendary, as are many of the stories found in the apocryphal gospels. It is the earliest depiction of Joseph as an elderly widower when he became engaged to Mary. This depiction allowed Christians to read about Jesus' brothers and sisters in the New Testament Gospels as if they were Joseph's children by a previous wife, and hence Jesus' half-siblings.

If we had only the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke to go by, we would not necessarily think of Joseph as an elderly widower. The accounts don't preclude this, but they don't suggest it either. Instead, if this engagement were a typical engagement we would imagine that Mary was thirteen or fourteen when she got married (remember, in ancient Israel a girl became a woman with her first menstrual cycle and was married



shortly after that) and that Joseph was only a little older. Boys were required to have apprenticed under their fathers and be able to support themselves and a family before they married. So, if Joseph were not an elderly widower, we would suppose he may have been fourteen, fifteen, or perhaps sixteen when he “took Mary as his wife” (Matthew 1:24).

Yet the story of Joseph as an elderly widower took hold in the church. Sometime around the sixth century, a document called *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* was compiled, consisting of traditions concerning the Holy Family.\* In the document, Joseph was said to be ninety years old when his first wife died, leaving him with six children to raise. Not only was Joseph described as a carpenter, but, because of his piety and wisdom, the legend had developed that he'd also been a priest. This apocryphal account said that a year after his first wife's death, Joseph was chosen to become the husband of Mary. Two years later, during a betrothal period when a couple was regarded as married but could not yet consummate their relationship (you'll learn more about that in chapter 2), Mary became pregnant. It was then that Joseph formally married her, which would have

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\* We're not sure when this work was written. Some suggest as early as the fifth century, others as late as the seventh century.

made him ninety-three when Jesus was born. According to this story, Joseph died at the age of one hundred eleven, when Jesus was eighteen.

Legends such as this built upon one another and shaped the view that many in the church had of Joseph. Whether this story is true or not, it supported an idea that began emerging with the church's deepening devotion to Mary—namely, that she was perpetually a virgin and never consummated her marriage to Joseph. By the fourth century this view was commonly held, and even today it is an official doctrine of the Catholic Church. But Catholics were far from the only Christians who believed it; Eastern Orthodox churches subscribed to it, as did Martin Luther and most of the Protestant Reformers. To my surprise, I discovered that even John Wesley, the eighteenth-century founder of Methodism, held this view.<sup>1</sup>

Today, many Protestants reject the idea that Mary remained a virgin for life, or that Joseph was an elderly widower. They view Joseph as a young man when he married Mary and believe that the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels (see Matthew 12:47; 13:55-56; Mark 6:3; and others) were the biological children of Mary and Joseph, Jesus' younger siblings. If we discount the early church traditions about Joseph's

age and the need to insist that Mary was perpetually a virgin, a younger Joseph seems to make the most sense to me. As I pointed out, the Gospels can be read to support either of these views.

### **Joseph in Classical Art**

We can see these two different views by looking at classical images of Joseph, particularly in Renaissance and later art. In the early 1600s, Italian artist Guido Reni painted several famous images of “St. Joseph and the Christ Child” that portrayed Joseph as an elderly man holding the infant Jesus in a loving embrace. The contrast in age can be seen clearly in two images from the Baroque era that are shown on the next page. In “The Holy Family with Dog,” Spanish painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo showed Joseph as a young, vigorous father; whereas in “St. Joseph with the Infant Jesus,” Italian painter and printmaker Elisabetta Sirani portrayed Joseph as an older man.

I’ve encouraged my congregation to look at their Nativity sets at home to see how Joseph is portrayed. Many portray Joseph as an elderly man, though some, particularly those created by Protestant artists, show him to be quite young.

*A Carpenter Named Joseph*



“The Holy Family with Dog”  
by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo



“St. Joseph with the Infant  
Jesus” by Elisabetta Sirani

So, Joseph was either an aged widower who had children by a previous wife, or he was a fourteen-to-eighteen-year-old youth who had other children with Mary after the birth of Jesus. If all we had were the New Testament Gospel accounts—absent the early church’s conviction that Mary must have remained perpetually a virgin (built upon the idea, it seems, that sexual intimacy with Joseph in the years after Jesus’ birth would have diminished her in some way)—I believe most would conclude that Joseph was a young man when Jesus was born. But again, the Gospel accounts of Joseph and

Mary are not incompatible with the view that Joseph was an elderly widower. I leave it to the reader to decide.

### **Joseph the Carpenter**

In Matthew 13:54-56, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth, and some were offended by his teaching. They asked, “Isn’t he the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother named Mary? Aren’t James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas his brothers? And his sisters, aren’t they here with us? Where did this man get all this?”

Mary is named in this passage, as are the brothers. The sisters are not named, but it is mentioned that they were living in Nazareth. Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, is not named, likely indicating that by the time Jesus was pursuing his ministry, Joseph had died. Nevertheless, Joseph’s occupation was remembered and mentioned: he was the carpenter.

The people expressed surprise at Jesus, and not in a good way. You can almost hear the snide tone when they asked: “Where did he get this wisdom? Where did he get the power to work miracles? Isn’t he the carpenter’s son?” (vv. 54-55). The mention of his father’s profession seems clearly aimed at discrediting Jesus, saying in effect, “How can a lowly carpenter’s son have such wisdom and power?”

Explore the life of Joseph.  
Exchange your doubt for courage.

*"In typical fashion, Adam brings together investigative scholarship and his ability to communicate in a simple and applicable way. He portrays Joseph by exploring the Bible, as well as the apocryphal gospels that shaped church tradition. Be prepared to find some surprises here!"* —**Mike Slaughter**, Pastor Emeritus of Ginghamburg Church; author of *Made for a Miracle* and *Down to Earth*

*"I am impressed by the pastoral sensitivity and careful research in this book. His recovery of the long-neglected Joseph will be helpful to many readers, especially at Christmas."* —**J. Philip Wogaman**, former Dean of Wesley Theological Seminary; author of *What Christians Can Learn from Other Religions* and *Christian Ethics*

**Praise for *The Journey***

*"This book may be the greatest Christmas present of the year. Adam thoughtfully, movingly walks us through what really happened when God touched this planet. The richness of the full story will touch your life as well."* —**John Ortberg**, author of *What Is God's Will for My Life?*

*"If you think you know the story of Jesus birth, think again! This wonderful book sets us on a journey to the times and characters of Christmas so we experience Christ's birth in a new way."* —**Joel C. Hunter**, author of *Church Distributed*



**ADAM HAMILTON** is senior pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in the Kansas City area, cited as the most influential mainline church in America. A master at explaining questions of faith in a down-to-earth fashion, he is the author of many books including *Moses, Creed, Half Truths, The Journey, The Way*, and *24 Hours That Changed the World*. To learn more about Adam and follow his blog postings, visit [www.AdamHamilton.org](http://www.AdamHamilton.org).

**Abingdon Press™**  
[www.abingdonpress.com](http://www.abingdonpress.com)

Cover design: Marc Whitaker

RELIGION/Holidays/Christmas & Advent US \$19.99

ISBN-13: 978-1-5018-1408-2



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