

# JESUS *and* HIS FAMILY

Portraits from the Bible



ROBERT M SOLOMON



PRAISE FOR *JESUS AND HIS FAMILY* AND  
FOR ROBERT M SOLOMON

Bishop Solomon has written a remarkable book on the family of Jesus. He leaves no stone unturned. This is no syrupy, sentimental overview; it is a graceful, measured, informed and spiritually enriching feast. This book is beautifully organized so the journey through the terrain is a felicitous one. And each chapter ends with carefully chosen questions to take the reader yet deeper into the themes explored. It is equally accessible for both personal study and group study. A jewel of a book, no less.

Rev Dr William J Abraham  
Outler Professor of Theology and Wesley Studies,  
Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor, Perkins School of Theology,  
Southern Methodist University, USA

This book fills an aching need by helping us realign our family life with a template that is derived from the Holy Family. Its clear and devotional style will make it accessible to people from all walks of life. Some of the astute observations on New Testament passages will be of interest even to seasoned scholars.

Dr Tan Kim Huat  
Chen Su Lan Professor of New Testament and Academic Dean,  
Trinity Theological College, Singapore

By organizing data from the Gospels and from extra-biblical literature, Solomon does a wonderful job to help readers imagine what Jesus' earthly family life was like. More importantly, he elucidates how Jesus has identified with us by embracing family life, in all its joys and frustrations. Anyone seeking a straightforward and clear construction of Jesus' family ties—and what they mean for us today—will find this a useful companion.

Kevin P Emmert

Associate Editor, *Christianity Today*

Bishop Solomon has a way of simplifying biblical truths with practical insights and application for daily Christian life. In this book he meticulously and conscientiously extracts family themes from the life of our Lord Jesus. Books written by Asians bearing family themes are rare. The approach here is even rarer. The author's perspective is unique: our Lord Jesus came from a Trinitarian family, became a member of a human family, and now, we can become a member of His family. The content is inimitable. Those who are earnest about family themes will want to take this book seriously.

Rev Dr T Jeyakumar

President, Trinity Annual Conference, The Methodist Church in Malaysia; author of *A Family-Friendly Church*

Robert Solomon offers us, in *Jesus and his family*, a book that is a bit different. In church we hear little about those missing 30 years of Jesus' life and yet they must have been important if we take seriously the fact of the incarnation. This book pulls together the facts and stories that do exist, from biblical and extrabiblical sources, and offers a degree of biography without becoming fanciful. Helpful for study groups in church who want to think more deeply about the humanity of Jesus.

Rev Dr Sally Nelson  
Baptist Tutor at St Barnabas Theological Centre in Sheffield,  
and Editor, *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, UK

Bishop Solomon's book brings us on an intriguing journey to explore Jesus' relationship with his earthly family. This is a fascinating topic and one that is near to all of us as we each are intimately connected with families. It is well-researched and yet personal. The questions for reflection at the end of each chapter brings us closer to thinking about our own relationships with our own family members.

The Bishop in choosing to write on this topic reveals his deep interest in and concern for families. I recall he had expressed this when I met him some years ago whilst he was still in office. I congratulate him on the completion of this labour of love and commend it to your reading and meditation.

Benny Bong  
Marital and Family Therapist, and  
Director of The Family Therapist, Singapore



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HIS FAMILY  
Portraits from the Bible

Robert M Solomon



GENESIS

*To my family,  
for whom I am ever thankful to God.  
– R.S.*

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## Preface

There are few readily accessible books on Jesus in relationship to His earthly family. This is rather odd, considering the fact that Jesus spent most of His earthly life in a family setting. He was a member of a human family, into which He was born, and in which He grew up and lived for up to 30 years. Failure to appreciate this sufficiently would make us miss some important aspects of the life of Jesus. He is not some figure alone in a social vacuum, who one day broke out into the public sphere. He was part of a family, a fact that makes Him identify with us, even as we experience the joys and frustrations of family life.

There may not be many books on the subject because the Bible does not offer too many details to satisfy our curiosity. The Gospel writers offer a few glimpses of Jesus as a baby and child, and as an adult member of His family, but beyond that, we are led directly into the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The epistles

touch on the elevated Christ and how He relates with us. Extra-biblical sources provide much more information. Unfortunately, many of them carry embellished stories that may be more hagiographic fable than historical fact. But thankfully, there are historical works, like that of Hegesippus (second-century Christian chronicler) and Eusebius (early-fourth-century church historian), that provide some additional information that is fairly reliable.

This book is meant to provide an accessible account of the family of Jesus, based largely on the relatively limited accounts in the Bible. We avoid fanciful stories and speculation that stray from biblical accounts. We will instead reflect on what the Bible says about the family of Jesus and seek to gain valuable insights to deepen our understanding of Jesus as well as how He related with family members. We will look at the biblical texts and try to flesh them out by imagining conversations that may have taken place, motives in the various relationships, and other details that may emerge by reading ‘between the lines’. In doing so, we stay tethered to the biblical texts as we attempt to meditate on them. In the process, we will also learn something about ourselves and our call as members of our own families.

We will bear in mind throughout that Jesus was fully divine, which makes His membership in a human

family filled both with mystery and fascination. Because He also belongs to the Trinitarian Family, there are immense implications when He identified His larger family as comprising those who learn to do God's will. As He invites us to follow Him and become part of His Family, we are led to the greatest adventure and the highest blessings that we can ever think of.

It was a joy and privilege to write this book as an extended meditation on the Lord Jesus and His family, and I am happy to present it to readers for their edification.

Robert M Solomon  
Pentecost 2015



ONE



# Jesus and His Two Families

When I was in primary school, we had a deputy principal who made a mark in the lives of his students. He often went beyond the call of duty and visited the homes of some of his students, especially if they had problems. It was striking to see him in our sprawling village doing his house calls. We were used to seeing him in the school—that is where he belonged. But to see him in our village was a big event for us small kids. The sight of the deputy principal visiting his students' homes impressed me greatly.

For this teacher, students were not isolated names and faces. Each came from a family, each had a story, and each belonged to a community. This was a lesson I learnt in those early days. Visiting their families helped the teacher to understand his students more deeply and therefore enabled him to deal with the students more effectively and compassionately.

## THE HEAVENLY “FAMILY” OF JESUS

When we approach Jesus, we often make Him an isolated figure. We forget that He had family connections. In fact Jesus belonged to two families. He belonged to the Trinity, the Divine Family of three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christians do not often think deeply enough about the Trinity. Without appreciating the Trinity sufficiently, we fail to understand the reality that God is love; it is His essential characteristic.<sup>1</sup> We fail to recognise that this love is expressed eternally in self-giving love as each Person in the Trinity pours Himself lovingly into the others. It is from this self-giving love that Jesus came to the world to save sinners. He issues the Trinitarian invitation to enter into the reality of Trinitarian love, into the plans and joy of the Trinitarian community.

The Three persons in the Trinity are united in purpose and mission. They work together for their own glory and our eternal good. We understand Jesus only if we appreciate the reality of the Trinity. The early church worked hard to understand the two major doctrines of the Christian faith: The Trinity and the Person of Jesus Christ. Both were related, and understanding one led to better understanding of the other. That Jesus has a Divine “Family” is a key to our understanding and experience of the Christian life.



## THE EARTHLY FAMILY OF JESUS

Jesus also had another family—his earthly one. This too is often forgotten by many Christians. Yes, we do remember at Christmas that Mary and Joseph were around, but beyond that we do not give much thought to the earthly family of Jesus. This is strange because Jesus spent 30 years at home. His life in a domestic setting was far longer than his time in public ministry (which was about four years or so). For a large part of His life, Jesus functioned as a son and elder brother at home, interacting with His family members and taking on familial responsibilities.

### WHERE CAN WE FIND INFORMATION ON THE FAMILY OF JESUS?

Part of the reason for this lack of appreciation of Jesus as a member of an earthly family may be because there is so little information in the Bible about it. To be sure, the Gospel writers aimed to focus on the mission of Jesus; hence much space is given to His public ministry and especially His death on the cross and His resurrection. Mark and John quickly move to the ministry of the adult Jesus without any specific reference to His birth and

childhood. Nevertheless, they do give some information, though minimal, on Mary and the siblings of Jesus.

It was the curiosity about the family life of Jesus that perhaps led to the emergence of several extra-biblical sources that sought to fill in the gaps. These were apocryphal literature, such as the *Protevangelium of James* that purports to give further details about the family of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Others tell fantastic stories about the childhood of Jesus. It is likely that some of these stories were based on accounts circulating from early sources (perhaps Mary or other family members) but became embellished as they spread in space and time. We must therefore be careful about relying too heavily on these stories.

The historical work of the early church historian Eusebius stands on more reliable ground. His *Ecclesiastical History* offers many insights into the family life of Jesus and His family members.<sup>3</sup> In several places Eusebius borrows from the work of Hegesippus, a Jewish Christian historian who lived in the second century and who collected historical accounts from early Jewish Christians in Palestine. He collected pieces of information related to the family of Jesus. Though his work now exists only in fragmentary form, it continues to exist in the references made to it in Eusebius' works.

## AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DETOUR: BONE BOXES AND FAMILY TOMBS

In 2002, the existence of a small limestone box from the first century was announced at a press conference by the Biblical Archaeological Society and Discovery Channel. Shortly after, details were revealed by Hershel Shanks in *Biblical Archaeological Review* magazine. Such boxes were commonly used in Jewish burial practices in the first century. Dead bodies were buried in tombs for a year or so, after which the remaining bones were collected and placed in a limestone box known as an ossuary. What was sensational about the ossuary described by Shanks was the inscription on it.

The words “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” in Aramaic were found inscribed on one of the sides of this box, which has since come to be known as the James Ossuary. The ossuary belonged to Oded Golan, an Israeli antiquities collector. An expert claimed that the ossuary and its inscription were authentic. If true, this could be archaeological evidence for the existence of Jesus, since the remains may be of James, one of the brothers of Jesus named in the Bible (Mark 6:3). However controversy immediately arose as experts debated about the authenticity of the inscription.

It was discovered that the Aramaic words for “brother of Jesus” were more lightly cut than the earlier words and appeared to be the work of a different hand and could have been a later addition. Some scholars such as Ben Witherington, who co-wrote a book on the issue with Shanks,<sup>4</sup> argued that the inscription was authentic, while others held the opposite view.

In 2003, the Israeli Antiquities Authority determined that the inscription was forged, and Golan was charged the following year with fraud and forgery. The trial took seven years before a verdict was arrived at. Golan was acquitted of forgery but was charged for other illegal activities. The judge mentioned that the acquittal from forgery charges “does not mean that the inscription on the ossuary is authentic or that it was written 2,000 years ago”.<sup>5</sup> Debates on the authenticity of the inscription on the James Ossuary continue.

An even more sensational claim was made in 2007 in a film, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, made by investigative journalist Simcha Jacobovici and Canadian film director James Cameron. Jacobovici also wrote a book to claim that a tomb discovered in Jerusalem in the city’s East Talpiot area (now known as the Talpiot tomb) was the burial tomb of Jesus and His family. Several ossuaries were used as evidence, including one that is said to have the inscription “Jesus, son of Joseph”, though the inscription is so badly done and unclear that its interpretation has

been challenged by scholars. Other ossuaries are claimed to have inscriptions with the names of some people associated with Jesus, such as His mother Mary, His brother Joseph, Mary Magdalene, His alleged son, and someone called Matthew. To add to the confusion, it was claimed that the James Ossuary was stolen from this so-called “Jesus Family Tomb”.

That all these claims were spurious and on shaky ground when closely examined has been shown by careful scholarship.<sup>6</sup> In the first place, the names mentioned in the tomb were so common that to claim that the tomb was the family tomb of Jesus is statistically unacceptable. Also the inscription naming Jesus is also suspect and rejected by serious scholars. That the James Ossuary was connected with this tomb has also been convincingly dismissed.<sup>7</sup> We know from Scripture that Jesus was raised from the dead and that His tomb was empty, and that His disciples and His brothers such as James were willing to be martyred for proclaiming Jesus as the Risen Lord.

## REFLECTING ON THE FAMILY OF JESUS

The church concluded from Scripture and her experience of Christ that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. He is one Person with two natures (divine and human). It is good to remember that He belonged to two families: A divine heavenly one and a human earthly one. It is useful

to bear this in mind as we think of Jesus and understand who He is. In this book, our focus is on the earthly family of Jesus. But even as we do so, we must keep in the background the truth that He is also fully God and that He is one of the three Persons in the Trinity. In fact, remembering this would help us to better appreciate the earthly family of Jesus.

As we reflect on the earthly family of Jesus, we must avoid taking flights of fancy and relying too much on unreliable embellished stories that are found in extra-biblical literature and in popular piety over the centuries. It is best to stick to whatever information and insight we find in the Bible itself. This book will therefore explore biblical texts that shed light on the family of Jesus; though scant they offer sufficient light for our task. We will make some reference to Eusebius and Hegesippus to provide extra colour and shade that will help in our reflection on biblical texts.

How did Jesus relate with His family members—with Mary and Joseph and His siblings? We have limited information in the Bible, but enough to help us imagine some of the conversations they might have had. Having Jesus in the family would have been quite a striking and unique experience for each of the family members. There is so much that would have gone on between the family members. Karen Kingsbury's *The Family of Jesus* is one

attempt to use imagination to paint a portrait of Jesus through the eyes of six of His relatives.<sup>8</sup> As a writer of “inspirational fiction”, Kingsbury writes a fictional account based loosely on some biblical accounts.

This book will not seek to write imaginary fiction, though it will try to interpret the biblical texts using some degree of imagination. We will stick quite close to the biblical record and attempt to fill in the gaps using extra-biblical historical sources as well as making educated guesses on events and relationships in the family of Jesus.

## JESUS IN A HUMAN FAMILY

In some way, all our human families need the grace and presence of Jesus. The first miracle in the ministry of Jesus was at a wedding in Cana (John 2), where Jesus turned ordinary water into extraordinary wine. We all need Him in our family lives, to lead and guide us, to sustain and bless us. In every family portrait, by faith we must include Jesus as a Divine member of our families. He is there to rule and bless us.

In his book *Generation to Generation*, Jewish rabbi, Edwin Friedman uses the idea of the family as a system to point out an important lesson. For every family to function well and to cope with crisis, there needs to be a “non-anxious presence” in the family system.<sup>9</sup> Without

such a non-anxious presence, the family will become dysfunctional and suffer. Jesus is that non-anxious presence in our families, offering strong and steady company. As we trust Him and hold His hand, the ship remains unsinkable. This is true of all our families.

The way Jesus entered His human family is, however, unique. While He offers to enter all our families as the Risen Lord, He entered that original human family as a newborn baby. He grew up in that family, rubbed shoulders with its members, ate with them and helped out with the family chores. None of us may fully understand this, that God would walk around in a family as a child, that He would eat with the others, go to sleep with the other children, work in the family workshop, and talk to them like in any other family. The members of this family would have later, on hindsight, wondered in awe that they had God grow up in their household! What an amazingly mind-boggling experience.

Indeed, this was a unique family and it is worth the effort to look more closely at it and its members. This is what we will do in this book.

Let us begin our journey.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would you explain that Jesus is fully divine and fully human? What is the danger of ignoring either of these facts?
  2. How does reflecting on the family of Jesus help us understand the humanity of Jesus? Why is the earthly family of Jesus unique?
  3. How does Jesus enter every family and what is His ministry in each? Why does the fact that Jesus belongs to both heaven and earth help us to connect with God and with others when we are related to Jesus?
-



## TWO



# Joseph

The character of Joseph in the New Testament is for many people an enigmatic figure. Little is known about him from reading the Bible, but we do have a few key pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that can be put together to reveal a character who is fascinating yet under-appreciated.

Joseph features prominently enough in the narrative accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels, but note that not all the Gospels mention him, for Mark and John skip the “Christmassy” parts. It is Matthew and Luke’s description of the Magi, special star, angels, shepherds, and Mary and Joseph that provide the basic framework for Christmas plays and songs.

If you are putting up a Christmas play, you would need the character of Joseph in the cast. He has an important role to play, travelling with Mary to Bethlehem, seeing an angel in a dream telling him to escape with his wife and newborn child to Egypt, and likewise returning home

after the danger (posed by the highly insecure and cruel King Herod who ruled Judea) passed.

We do not see Joseph again until the story of the visit of the family to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old. There Joseph has the role of a supporting cast member. Mary does the talking and speaks for Joseph who remains silently in the background. After this event, Joseph is seen no more and practically disappears from the biblical text (apart from being mentioned here and there as the father of Jesus). Whatever happened to him is the subject of much discussion and speculation.

Let us now try to ascertain who this Joseph was.

## A DESCENDENT OF DAVID

Both Matthew and Luke list the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–37). Genealogies were important to Jews for they revealed the pedigree and identity of a person. In these two lists we have the identity of Jesus revealed. There are some significant differences between the two lists.

Matthew was writing to Jewish readers and it was important to begin with the genealogy of Jesus. The list is introduced and summarised at the end with the names of Jesus, David and Abraham all connected in two single sentences (Matthew 1:1, 17). Matthew was eager to show that Jesus was the son of Abraham (and therefore

a Jew) and the son of David (and therefore in the line of royalty).

Luke's purpose was to show that Jesus was the Son of God, and so he places the genealogy of Jesus immediately after the account of His baptism when God the Father spoke to Jesus: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). The genealogy goes from the present to the past (unlike Matthew's list which goes in the opposite direction) and stops with God, whereas Matthew's list goes back to Abraham.

When we try to locate the place of Joseph in the two lists, we encounter some difficulties. To be sure, Joseph is mentioned in both lists but he seems to have two different fathers! In Matthew, Joseph's father was Jacob (Matthew 1:16) while Luke notes that his father was Heli (Luke 3:23). Surely one of them is wrong? Could it be that either Matthew or Luke was mistaken?

As we examine the two lists further we will notice something else. The names of fathers and sons are the same in both the lists from Abraham to David, but after David, the two lists diverge from one another. In Matthew, David's son is Solomon while Nathan is the son of David in Luke. Both were sons of David and Bathsheba, and it was Solomon who succeeded David as king. Hence the names in Matthew that follow Solomon are familiar names because we meet them in the books of Kings and Chronicles. They were the kings of Judah.

Why then did Luke trace the line of Jesus through Nathan? We meet unfamiliar characters except for Shealtiel and Zerubbabel who feature in both Matthew (1:12) and Luke (3:27) in a brief convergence of the two lists only for them to diverge again. Zerubbabel, the grandson of the last king of Judah, King Jehoiachin (1 Chronicles 3:19), returned with the exiles from Babylon in the sixth century BC and became a governor of Jerusalem.

Still, we are faced with the problem of Joseph having two different fathers. Why does Scripture create this apparent discrepancy? The solution may lie in recognising that Matthew and Luke may have had two different goals in tracing the genealogical line of Jesus; hence the two divergent lines. Matthew's list goes through Solomon showing the official royal line of David. Joseph belonged to that line and therefore because he was the foster-father of Jesus, the Lord's royal line could be established. He was the son of David.

Luke traces the line of Jesus through Nathan, a secondary line, but why? Scholars have suggested that Luke's line traces the actual line of Mary rather than that of Joseph. In our English Bibles we have the recurring phrase, so and so the son of so and so. In the original Greek the text is tighter and simply says so and so of so and so. Literally Luke 3:23 says "Joseph of Heli". Some scholars have suggested that Heli is the father or

forefather of Mary, thus suggesting that the royal descent of Jesus could be directly traced through Mary too. In fact, Joseph was only the foster father of Jesus, but Mary actually conceived and gave birth to Jesus. Jesus' actual royal lineage could be traced through Mary while Joseph provides the official royal line.

It is not surprising that Luke's introduction of the lineage of Jesus begins by distancing Joseph somewhat. Jesus "was the son, *so it was thought*, of Joseph" (Luke 3:23). The emphasis here seems to be the line of Mary through whom Jesus is connected with his royal ancestor David.

### A YOUNG MAN OR AN OLD MAN?

Christmas plays and paintings depict Joseph variously. In some traditions, Joseph appears to be a wise old man. In others, he is a good-looking young man. What really was Joseph's age? The Bible does not mention Joseph's age, but different church traditions have painted Joseph in various ways because of certain doctrinal developments.

As the Bible gives limited information on Joseph, Christians have gathered additional information from extra-biblical sources. One of the most important is the *Protevangelium of James*, also known as the *Infancy Gospel of James*, or simply, the *Gospel of James*. This book is attributed to James, one of the brothers of Jesus

and was written around AD 150. Most scholars, therefore, do not believe that James was the author, and the early church considered this book as apocryphal literature. The word “apocryphal” means “things put away” and refers to the church’s view that these books were considered for inclusion in the biblical canon but were left out as they were not considered to be inspired as the biblical books were. Still, these books were considered as helpful.

The protevangelium literature that emerged in the early centuries of the church sought to satisfy the need among Christians to know more about Jesus before His public ministry as recorded in the canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Examples besides the *Protevangelium of James* include the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. These two books were subsequently combined as the *Infancy Gospel of Matthew* (or the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*). Others include the *Syriac Infancy Gospel*, the *History of Joseph the Carpenter* and the *Life of John the Baptist*.

These books aimed to satisfy the curiosity of Christians who wanted more information on Jesus and His growing up years. Some of the information is suspect and the authenticity of books like the *Protevangelium of James* has been questioned by scholars. As early as the third century, Origen of Alexandria mentioned this book but considered it of questionable authority and authenticity. However, he considered some of the claims



of the book to be true. One of these is that Joseph was an elderly widower when he married Mary.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible narratives insist that as far as Joseph's marital relations with Mary went, "he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son" (Matthew 1:25). This makes it clear that Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus and underlines the fact that "what is conceived in [Mary] is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:21). This much is clear. But in the early church, some ideas were developing that extrapolated the virginity of Mary before and during the birth of Jesus to one of perpetual virginity.

One of the challenges for such a doctrinal tangent was the biblical fact that Jesus had brothers and sisters. Some people in the early church developed the notion that these siblings were not borne by Mary but were the children of a much older Joseph from his previous marriage; the Eastern Orthodox Church believes that Joseph's first wife was named Salome. The siblings of Jesus were thus the stepbrothers and stepsisters of Jesus.

The *Protevangelium of James* describes how the elderly Joseph was chosen by lot as God's choice to take care of the teenage Mary. He says: "I received her by lot as my wife, and she is not yet my wife, but she has conceived by the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> Still, the book does not say that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary after Jesus was born. But the *History of Joseph*

*the Carpenter* (written between the fourth and seventh centuries) goes further by giving Joseph's age (he was 90 when betrothed to Mary, and died at the age of 111) and noting that he already had six children (four sons and two daughters) and had no sexual relations with Mary at all.<sup>3</sup> Thus was emphasised the perpetual virginity of Mary. With the increasing veneration of Mary in some quarters in the church, these ideas are not surprising. More on this later. Suffice to say, at this point, that for the Orthodox and Roman Catholic branches of Christianity, Joseph was an elderly widower when he married Mary.

Protestants have no problems accepting that Joseph could have been a young man with no previous marriage. He had sexual relations with Mary after the birth of Jesus and therefore fathered the younger brothers and sisters of Jesus. The fact that Joseph is introduced by Matthew and Luke without any specific mention of age is sufficient indication that his age was not a significant issue. He was what we would expect, a young man of marriageable age. Also, with reference to the birth of John the Baptist, Luke mentions that the parents of John were "both very old" (Luke 1:7). He makes no such reference to age in the case of Mary and Joseph (Luke 1:26–27). If the Gospel writers wanted further evidence that the birth of Jesus was a supernatural event and that there was no earthly father, they would have highlighted that Joseph was an old widower if indeed that was the case. But they did not

mention such a thing, focusing only on the fact that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived and born.

## A CARPENTER AND BUILDER

The Bible describes Joseph as a carpenter. The original Greek word is *tektōn* which refers to a worker who dealt with building materials such as wood and masonry. It is the root word from which we get words such as “technic” and “technology”. In other words, Joseph was a craftsman or a general worker who built things, and these things could have been furniture, wooden implements or buildings. Joseph was good with his hands and was a worker—hence he is also known as St Joseph the Worker.

It is noteworthy that God chose to have His Son born and grow up in the home of a carpenter rather than in the palace of a king or the stately home of a wealthy merchant or the famous home of a learned and much-respected rabbi. Joseph would be a person most people would be comfortable with as he was a common man (even though he had descended from David). He served God with his hands and took care of his family by working hard.

His status was that of an ordinary man—a one-of-us kind of man. When Jesus visited his hometown Nazareth, he taught in the synagogue and the people were initially “amazed” (Matthew 13:54). They wondered, “Where did

this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” They could not believe that Jesus could display such wisdom and power. They were sceptical and dismissed Jesus. “Then they scoffed, “He’s *just* the carpenter’s son...” (Matthew 13:55, NLT).

Nazareth was not on any list of important towns of Israel. It was an obscure little village in Galilee. And Galilee was considered provincial—a place for hillbillies and country bumpkins. When Jesus taught in the temple in Jerusalem, He spoke with such authority that some people concluded that he was the promised Prophet, while others even wondered if He was the Messiah, the Christ (John 7:40). Still others dismissed the notion asking, “How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David’s family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?” (John 7:41–42).

When this discussion reached the Pharisees, they too dismissed Galilee as a place that could produce anyone significant. Nicodemus, who had earlier visited Jesus at night (John 3), suggested that they should not leap to blind conclusions without first speaking to Jesus to find out what He was doing. Perhaps he thought that Jesus would be able to touch their hearts the way He had touched his. But they summarily dismissed Nicodemus’s wise advice. They asked sarcastically, “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not

come out of Galilee” (John 7:52). Of course, they had conveniently forgotten that the prophets Jonah (2 Kings 14:25) and Nahum (Nahum 1:1) had come from the region. Perhaps Elijah too had come from there (1 Kings 17:1). Such was the prejudice of the Pharisees and the people that they were blinded to the significance of Jesus.

In the popular imagination, Galilee was an insignificant outpost of Israel. And Nazareth was situated in Galilee. Hence, we should not be surprised that Nathanael, when told by Philip that he had met the Messiah promised in Scripture—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph, replied sceptically, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). It was only after meeting Jesus that Nathanael’s scepticism that he shared with his fellow-Jews was turned into faith.

Jesus was, of course, born in Bethlehem. Luke explains that by referring to the census ordered by Augustus Caesar, the Roman emperor, that brought Joseph and Mary who lived in Nazareth to Bethlehem, because it was the town of David, Joseph’s distant ancestor (Luke 2:1–5). But the family lived in Bethlehem for two years at the most, after which they fled to Egypt away from the cruel Herod who wanted to get rid of all competitors after hearing that the future king of the Jews had been born in Bethlehem. Then Joseph and Mary returned a few years later, after Herod’s death, and went to live in familiar Nazareth. And that’s where

Jesus grew up and lived till He set out to do His public ministry at around the age of 30.

Thus Jesus was never known as Jesus of Bethlehem but always as Jesus of Nazareth. In His triumphal procession into Jerusalem, Jesus was identified by the crowd as “Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matthew 21:11). It was ironical that unimportant Galilee and obscure Nazareth were identified with Jesus. And He was the son of a simple carpenter in Nazareth. Jesus chose to be identified in this way and brought dignity to a poor and hardworking worker like Joseph. Beyond that, Jesus adopted Joseph’s trade. He must have helped His father Joseph and became a carpenter Himself. His townsfolk identified Him as the town’s carpenter. When Jesus visited Nazareth, the people observed His ministry and asked incredulously, “Isn’t this the carpenter?” (Mark 6:3). Before He set out for His public ministry, Jesus was a carpenter, just like Joseph.

### A SILENT MAN

In a church Christmas play, a boy was given the part of the innkeeper. He had very much wanted to be Joseph because he imagined it to be a more glamorous role. He was jealous of the boy who played Joseph and planned his revenge. During the play, when Joseph knocked at the

inn's door, the innkeeper opened the door. When Joseph asked for a room, the innkeeper opened the door widely and said, "Sure, I have a nice room for both of you." As this was not how the play was supposed to go, Joseph was stunned for a while and the innkeeper smiled impishly. Then Joseph looked in and remarked, "Now this is a real dump! Who would want to stay in a place like this?" He then walked away with Mary to find the stable.

If the play was to follow the biblical text strictly, the part of Joseph would have been an easy one—he would not have had to say any lines!

It is quite incredible that such an important person as Joseph is so silent in Scripture. There is not even a single word that he had uttered that is quoted in the Bible. Search the Gospels for as many times as you wish but you will not find Joseph speaking even one word.

Joseph is the archetype of the strong silent male. He exercised leadership in bringing Mary to Bethlehem, finding a suitable place for Mary to give birth to Jesus, bringing his family to Egypt to flee from Herod's cruel sword, and bringing them back at the right time. But all this while, he is not recorded to have said a word. Was he a dumb man? Surely, he spoke words, but none of them are recorded in Scripture. He was truly the strong silent type, like many men at home.

Lazarus of Bethany is another example of a man who is portrayed as having Joseph-like silence. His sisters,

Mary and Martha, spoke a number of times and their words are recorded for Bible readers but none of Lazarus' words are recorded. He remains silent in Scripture.

Could it be that the Gospel writers did not want to give Joseph a greater place than was necessary? After all, they wanted to show that Jesus was the Son of God. To also mention that He was the son of Joseph may serve to cloud that fact. In any case, Joseph does not have a speaking part in Scripture.

And yet, we can be sure that he spoke much. He must have had many memorable conversations with Mary, Jesus and his children. He would have spoken to his customers and neighbours. But all those conversations are not available to us. We can only guess and imagine.

## A RIGHTEOUS MAN

Matthew brings out the brilliant character of Joseph. He was a "righteous man" (Matthew 1:19). Those few words speak volumes of Joseph. When he heard that Mary to whom he was betrothed, was pregnant, he decided to respond in a godly way. He knew that he was not the father for they had not had any sexual union yet. He came to a conclusion that any man in his situation would have arrived at, and decided to act righteously. He could not condone what he thought Mary was guilty of, but he



also did not want to expose her and shame her publicly. So he decided to “divorce her quietly” (Matthew 1:19).

Here we recognise that Joseph had God’s qualities. He was just and compassionate at the same time. He was righteous and had a clear sense of right and wrong in God’s eyes, but he also had God’s merciful heart, a wonderful combination that belongs to God. Joseph was a man who feared God and sought to emulate God in his dealings with others.

Little did Joseph know that this situation had arisen because of God’s strange but true intervention. He found out when God sent an angel to speak to him and explain what God was doing (Matthew 1:20–25). Joseph was a godly man and was near God, near enough for God to speak to him. Joseph feared God and trusted God enough to believe what God had said and to act accordingly. It is no small matter to be a refugee, to pack up one’s bags and bring wife and infant to a land you have not been to before. Truly, Joseph was a man of faith. God chose him to be the foster father of His Son. We can indeed learn much from this man.<sup>4</sup>

Some people are known more by their deeds than by their words. Joseph is a good example of this. We do not have on record in Scripture any words he might have spoken, but the Bible records his faithful and obedient actions—how he protected Mary and Jesus, took care of

his family, and practised righteousness. Though Joseph remains silent in Scripture, he comes through as a godly man full of righteous actions. If we have access to the words he spoke, we would find congruence between his upright deeds and his godly speech.

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### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you meet Joseph in heaven, what questions would you ask him? How do you think he would answer your questions?
  2. What about Joseph's character is particularly striking to you? Why? What can you learn from Joseph in this regard?
  3. Joseph worked with his hands and supported his family. Assess your own role in your family. How do you use your hands (or any other part of yourself) in your family?
-

### THREE



# Mary

In Christmas plays, besides Baby Jesus (who is usually played by a lifeless doll rather than an unpredictable real baby), the most important character is Mary. It is a choice role that girls and women would love to play. Just like the young women in ancient Israel—how much they wanted to be the mother of the Messiah. Who would be the fortunate one to get that role, not just in a play but in real history?

Mary of Nazareth got that part. She was chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah and to nurture Him as her son. It was a plum role, no doubt, but it also came with danger and difficulties. The way Mary responded to the news from heaven that she was to bear the Messiah in a most unusual way and the way she went about caring for Jesus and being His earthly mother showed that God made a perfect choice.

Let us find out more about this remarkable woman.

## A DESCENDENT OF DAVID

We have earlier seen how the two different genealogies can be explained as two different lines that spread out from David—one is the major royal line (according to Matthew) that descends to Joseph, and the other, a secondary line (according to Luke) that can be traced to Mary.

One of the challenges of the Gospel writers was how to show that Jesus was a direct descendent of King David, as prophesied in Scripture. If Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus, then how could one trace David's bloodline to Jesus? At most, it could be claimed that Jesus was the descendent of David because Joseph, a direct descendent adopted Him as his foster son. It may be legally acceptable but still leave some doubt as to the authenticity of Jesus' messiahship.

The problem is addressed by tracing the ancestral line of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Luke shows that Mary is a direct descendent of David, not through King Solomon but through his brother Nathan. In fact it makes sense that because Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus, it was necessary to show that Mary, who gave birth to Jesus (and was therefore the biological parent, though it is more complicated than this as Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit) was a direct descendent of David.

Luke tells us that Joseph was of Heli (Luke 3:23), and some scholars reconcile this with Matthew's account that says that Joseph's father was Jacob, by arguing that Luke was tracing Mary's line and Heli was related to Mary.<sup>1</sup> That much we can deduce from Scripture, though scholars have also offered other explanations (such as Matthew providing the official line and Luke the actual line of Joseph, or that Joseph's mother had two husbands through Levirate marriage).

Extra-biblical sources seek to give additional information about Mary. For example, according to the *Protevangelion of James*, Mary's parents were Joachim and Anne. Anne was said to have been barren for a long time and Mary was conceived when Anne was advanced in years. Mary was apparently dedicated as a temple virgin at the age of three. Other apocryphal literatures claim that Mary was about 12 years old when she was betrothed to Joseph, whose age varies in the different accounts. The reliability of these sources is, however, doubtful.

Scripture tells us that Mary's home was in Nazareth. After visiting her relative Elizabeth in Judea, Mary is said to have returned to "her own house" in Nazareth (Luke 1:56, KJV). Some of her relatives are mentioned in Scripture. Elizabeth was an older relative who also experienced a miraculous pregnancy in old age. The angel

who spoke to Mary mentioned Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy.

“And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”  
(Luke 1:37–38, ESV)

Elizabeth was married to an elderly priest, Zechariah, who was a descendent of Aaron. Elizabeth herself was also a descendent of Aaron (Luke 1:5) from the tribe of Levi and they both came from the priestly line. It is for this reason that scholars believe that Elizabeth was related to Mary through her maternal line, as Mary is believed to be a direct descendent of David from the tribe of Judah. Elizabeth and Zechariah were a godly couple. They were “righteous in the sight of God” (Luke 1:6). But Elizabeth was barren and they entered old age without a child. Then the impossible happened when Elizabeth conceived John the Baptist and this was announced beforehand to Zechariah by the angel Gabriel. Because Zechariah doubted this, he lost his ability to speak as a consequence until his son was born (Luke 1:18–20).

## A YOUNG WOMAN

Though Mary's age when she conceived Jesus is not mentioned, it is generally accepted that she was a young lady of marriageable age. She was probably in her teens, according to normal Jewish marriage practices. Matthew links the birth of Jesus to the old prophecy in Isaiah 7:14—"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel—which means 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23).

One of the hottest issues in the history of Bible translation was the translation of Isaiah 7:14 in the RSV in 1952. For centuries, English readers were used to reading the King James Bible which translated the Hebrew word *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 as "virgin". But the RSV changed the phrase to "young woman". This was immediately criticised by many as a denial of the virgin birth of Jesus. The KJV translators had used the word "virgin" because the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in the second and third centuries BC, had translated the Hebrew word *almah* as *parthenos*. The word *almah* appears seven times in the Old Testament, and the Septuagint translates the word on two occasions as *parthenos* (more clearly meaning "virgin"). This same Greek word is used in the original Greek in Matthew 1:23, which is a citation of Isaiah 7:14 in the Septuagint.

The RSV translators were of the opinion that it is the Hebrew word *bethulah* which is more consistently translated as “virgin” in the Septuagint in its relatively more frequent appearances (50 times) in the Old Testament. The word *almah* is said to be more ambiguous even as the Septuagint’s translations of it show. However, a close examination of Old Testament texts would show that the words *bethulah* and *almah* can also be interchangeably used even in the same passage. It is true that *almah* can mean young woman. But consider Genesis 24:43—the unmarried Rebekah is an *almah*. But in Genesis 24:16 she is also a *bethulah* (with a clear qualifier: “no man had ever lain with her”).

There is no case to doubt the virgin account. The Septuagint makes it clear. Also the way Matthew puts it makes it very clear. And Matthew is also Scripture. The story in Luke confirms it further.

Having considered all things, it would have been more appropriate if the RSV had used “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14, given the weight of evidence in favour of it. Eventually, the RSV did revert to “virgin” in its second Catholic edition in 2006.

The fact is that Mary was a virgin. Scripture makes it clear that Joseph “had no union with her until she gave birth to a son” (Matthew 1:25). Mary was betrothed to Joseph, and according to Jewish custom, this was like an engagement period but more binding



than an engagement. The couple will not consummate the marriage but if the couple broke up, a divorce was needed. Hence, Joseph considered a quiet divorce when he found out that Mary was pregnant. But Mary's pregnancy was an unimaginable miracle; she was a pregnant virgin. In the Old Testament, God could close and open wombs. But this time He makes a huge leap by causing a virgin birth!

## THE ANNUNCIATION

After her betrothal to Joseph, Mary had a shocking and life-changing experience. God sent His angel Gabriel to announce His plans to Mary, and she was right in the middle of those plans. The conversation that Mary had with Gabriel is most intriguing. The angel Gabriel is known to "stand in the presence of God" (Luke 1:19). And it was God who had personally sent Gabriel to Mary. Gabriel's presence must have bristled with God's intimacy and divinity. What an astounding visitor!

Gabriel greeted the young Mary, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). If any of us had a similar experience, we would first be rather disconcerted and fearful. Even an old, experienced priest like Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear when he saw Gabriel in Luke 1:12. Imagine meeting a real angel, and on top of that, Gabriel.

No wonder Mary was “greatly troubled” (Luke 1:29). Besides the astounding experience of meeting an angel, Mary was also troubled by the words. Why was the angel sent by God to her? What does “highly favoured” mean? Why was the angel telling her that God was with her? Usually God spoke in this way when He was sending someone on a difficult mission, such as Moses (Exodus 3:12) and Joshua (Joshua 1:9). What difficult mission had God in mind for the young maiden from Nazareth?

Gabriel reassured the startled and fearful Mary by telling her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God” (Luke 1:30). This must have had a calming effect on Mary. Gabriel knew her name! How nice to find out that heaven knows our name, especially in a favourable way. The Greek word that is translated “favoured” is connected with the word for “grace”. Mary was the recipient of God’s special grace. She was a highly graced person.

God’s grace often comes with some challenge or difficult task. It was this realisation that made Paul testify how the Lord answered his desperate prayers to have an excruciatingly painful “thorn in the flesh” removed. The Lord told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). The thorn remained in Paul’s flesh but he discovered the depths and sufficiency of God’s

grace, and grew further in maturity and Christian perfection.

Perhaps Mary had a disturbing inkling that God had a difficult task for her. And she was right. Gabriel quickly got down to business and revealed how Mary would be pregnant and give birth to Jesus, “the Son of the Most High” who would occupy the throne of David forever and whose “kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:31–33). Mary’s heart must have skipped several beats. She must have had enough knowledge of Scripture and religious teaching to know that Gabriel was talking about the long-awaited Messiah. The dream of every young Jewish woman had now become a reality for her.

Then Mary’s thoughts must have jolted to the mechanics of pregnancy. She would have thought that the Messiah would be born the usual way. But this was a really strange proposition. So she asked the angel with a puzzled look on her face, “How will this be... since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). Good question.

Gabriel then gave an astounding answer. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). The word “overshadow” means “to cover with a cloud”, like the cloud of Shekinah glory (Exodus 16:10; 19:9; 24:16; 34:5; 40:34) or the cloud of transfiguration (Matthew

17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34). Mary was going to be covered with the glory of God. She was going to be “clouded” by or with God.

This would be way out of anyone’s depth, let alone the depth of an ordinary young teenager from the obscure town of Nazareth. Mary was going to personally experience in her body and life the triune God. Father and Holy Spirit would act in her to make it possible for the heavenly Son to be conceived in her and to be born of her. What Paul realised later, that God’s power is made perfect in weakness, was going to be her experience too.

Gabriel’s message was clear but difficult to comprehend and accept. His message announced *God’s providence* (“you are highly favored”), revealed *God’s presence* with her (“The Lord is with you”), unveiled *God’s plan* (“You will be with child”), and declared *God’s power* working within her (“the power of the Most High will overshadow you”). God was in the heart of the angel’s message.

For Mary, the implications were clear. She was going to give birth to a son while remaining a virgin. Who would believe her incredible story? Would Joseph believe? How could he? How about her kith and kin? She would be the laughing stock in town. Instead of being “graced” by God she would be disgraced in Nazareth. Would she not be stoned to death when

people heard her story and claims? Would what the angel said really happen? Gabriel waited with bated breath to hear her response.

Frederick Beuchner, in *Peculiar Treasures*, put it in such moving terms: “She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he’d been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘You mustn’t be afraid, Mary,’ he said. And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.”<sup>2</sup>

Mary gave a wonderful response that showed that even for her young age, she reflected a deep faith in God that was prepared to plunge into the depths of God’s purposes and grace. She said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). Firstly, she said, “I am the Lord’s servant”. The servant does not question the Master, but takes orders. Mary identified herself as the Lord’s servant. Secondly, she said, “May it be to me” or “Let it be so”. She accepted God’s strange and incomprehensible plan, and submitted herself to God’s will. Though she did not fully understand what was happening or know how she was going to handle

anticipated difficulties, Mary submitted herself to God fully, grace or disgrace, life or death, favour or ridicule—she was in God’s hands. It is better to be in God’s hands than to try to live outside His plans and purposes. Mary knew that and surrendered herself to the difficult task that lay ahead of her.

### VISIT TO ELIZABETH

When the angel left her, Mary “hurried” to the town in the hilly country of Judea where her relative Elizabeth (meaning “God is my oath”) lived (Luke 1:39). The company of an angel may be comforting even as it is frightening, but human company is often needed for real warmth and comfort. Mary needed the company of Elizabeth, for it would take a woman to understand another woman. Perhaps Mary needed time to process all that she had heard from Gabriel. She needed some time out from familiar Nazareth. So she stayed with Elizabeth for three months before returning home. The first three months of a pregnancy can be difficult with morning sickness and bodily adjustments, and it was comforting staying in the house of an older godly relative.

It was hilly country. In Israel in the town of Ein Kerem is a church on a hilltop that marks the site where Mary and Elizabeth met. It is a pretty steep climb and can be physically challenging especially for a pregnant

woman. But Mary was very eager to meet Elizabeth. On the way did she have any second thoughts?

Whether she had second thoughts or not, when Mary reached Elizabeth's home and met her, she received a most encouraging and comforting response. The meeting of the two pregnant women (one, a woman too old to conceive and the other, a young virgin, both not supposed to be pregnant) was spectacular. Before Mary could sit down and tell Elizabeth all that Gabriel had told her and reveal to her that she was expecting, Elizabeth spoke with a loud voice. Filled with the Holy Spirit, she welcomed Mary with glorious words:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” (Luke 1:42–45)

This great welcome from the older, more experienced, and Spirit-filled woman must have been both comforting and reassuring to young Mary that God was behind the strange thing that was happening in her body and life. Mary's faith must have been strengthened as she found refuge in the home of Spirit-filled godly saints like

Zechariah and Elizabeth. Here was a Spirit-filled family. The biblical text emphasises that all the members of the family were Spirit-filled: Elizabeth (Luke 1:41), Zechariah (Luke 1:67), and even little John the Baptist who the angel said to Zechariah “will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth” (Luke 1:16). When Mary entered their home, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb “leaped for joy”.

We do not have any further information on the conversations between Mary and Elizabeth for the three months that Mary stayed in Elizabeth’s house. To be sure, Elizabeth must have been a spiritual mentor to the younger woman. They must have discussed much about God’s strange and miraculous ways and how important it was to trust and submit to Him. Zechariah was struck dumb because of his initial disbelief that a son would be born to him and Elizabeth. Therefore, not much would have transpired by way of conversations between him and Mary. But his godly presence would have been a source of great comfort and confidence.

When God gives us something difficult to do, He also equips us and surrounds us with people who will strengthen and aid us. Mary could strongly sense God’s presence in her life as angels visited her and her godly relatives encouraged her. Her heart was filled with song and she offered a song to God in praise of Him. Like Miriam, her namesake in the Old Testament (Exodus 15:21), Mary also sang a wonderful song to the Lord.



## MARY'S SONG

Mary sang a song which has been preserved in Scripture for all time. It has been sung by the church for centuries. The words reflect the heart and mind of godly maturity and it is amazing that Mary was probably a teenager when she sang this song.

“My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their  
inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”  
(Luke 1:46–55)

The song is Mary’s heartfelt response to what God was doing in her life and in the history of her nation. She was overwhelmed with joy that her worship of God overshadowed whatever concerns she may have had about her own personal circumstances. What would happen to her? Would people ridicule her, even stone her to death as one with a soiled reputation? All these apprehensions, if she had them, were pushed aside by the glorious view of God in her eyes of faith.

The song is strongly personal. She refers to “my soul”, “my spirit” and “me” (twice). It was a song that swelled up from her heart. It was a song that was sung joyfully but humbly (“humble state of his servant”) in the presence of a great God.

In the song, Mary turns her attention to God who is both mighty and powerful as well as gracious and merciful. Gordon Dahl observes in his American context that most middle-class people “tend to worship their work, work at their play and play at their worship.”<sup>3</sup> Such attitudes and habits have now become global. We often fumble in our worship of God, either being too full of ourselves or poisoned by our surrounding cultures. But for Mary, worship was serious stuff. Here, she was truly

worshipping God, with open heart and mouth. Her life lay open to the sovereign grace of God.

She began her song by declaring, “My soul glorifies the Lord”. The Greek word that is translated as “glorifies” is related to the word “mega” which is thus better translated in the King James Bible as “magnify”. How can we magnify the Lord, that is, make Him bigger? He becomes bigger only in our perception, perhaps as we draw closer to Him. As far as human idols are concerned, they are often nice from far but when we draw closer they are far from nice. Closer inspection of idols show up their faults and weaknesses. But God is different. When we draw closer to Him, He becomes more and more glorious and magnificent, the larger He becomes. Mary had first-hand experience of this as God drew close to her.

Mary was filled with great joy—“my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”. Mary knew that God was doing something new, based on His old promises. All of God’s actions are based on His perfect character. He is mighty and holy (v. 49). He has scattered the proud and brought down rulers (vv. 51, 52). He turns away the rich (v. 53), for He is neither impressed with human possessions nor can He be bribed. In this sinful world the strong push down the weak and the rich marginalise the poor, but God deals with these matters justly.

Above all, God shows mercy to those who fear Him. The word “mercy” appears twice in Mary’s song, emphasising the fact that she understood that God was acting graciously and mercifully towards His people. He lifts the humble, among whom Mary is included (v. 52). He has satisfied the hungry and helps His humble servants by lifting them up, and remembers His promises to them (cf. Gen 12:2; 15:5–6). God keeps His covenant and remembers His servants.

Therefore Mary realised that her impossible condition was not a curse, but a blessing. It was a blessing far beyond the expectations of any young Jewish maiden. For now Mary had found favour with God—she was God’s favourite, in that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary knew that all generations would call her blessed. She would not be forgotten as a woman caught in sin, but as the holy mother of Jesus. It was all God’s gracious doing.

## A BLESSED WOMAN

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and left her for home around the time of the birth of John the Baptist. She stepped into the unknown with faithful obedience, knowing that she was in the hands of the God who had spoken to her and acted in her life. In Ein Karem, she was called blessed and she wholeheartedly believed that

she was—by the grace and mercy of God. Her pregnancy would not lead to a curse but to a great blessing.

Who is truly blessed on earth? By the world's standards, the state of being blessed is often associated with worldly success—health, wealth, fame and fortune. But according to the Bible, true blessing is a state connected with our ready obedience to God, even in the most difficult and impossible situations. Obedience can turn what looks like a curse into a blessing. Why is that so?

In Mary's case, God was doing something wonderful. When God does something like this, it is often easy to miss, and difficult to understand. Both the Old Testament (Micah 5:1–5) and the New Testament (Hebrews 10:5–10) reveal what God was doing. Micah points out that God will send His Son as the eternal Ruler and Shepherd of Israel who will bring lasting peace. Hebrews reveals how God was going to achieve this. When Jesus came into the world, He fulfilled all the requirements of the Old Testament Law and thus became the one effective sacrifice that removed our sin and saved us. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ, who was born on earth according to God's perfect timing. "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4).

We must note that in accomplishing this, God chose what was insignificant in the eyes of the world. Bethlehem, though small, was going to produce the

eternal king. “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2). The same can be said of the humble young Mary from obscure Nazareth. It was an unlikely cast God had chosen for His greatest story. Insignificant Bethlehem, obscure Nazareth, young virgin Mary, old and barren Elizabeth, simple worker Joseph. But all this was done according to the ancient prophecies, according to God’s eternal plans. God does not scratch out any of His plans or skip any step in fulfilling what He had planned from eternity.

God’s script is perfect. What is required to make it all work out well is our obedience. Mary played her part faithfully when she trusted God. Her attitude reflected her obedience when she surrendered to God’s inscrutable plans by saying, “I am the Lord’s servant”. God chooses the most unlikely ones to play a role in His unfolding drama of salvation, centred around Jesus Christ, His Son. God knows the little people of this world. Do you have a part? Then you are truly favoured. God will use you if you desire to do His will, are willing to pay the cost, and are prepared to trust His promises.

At one time during the public ministry of Jesus, a woman referring to Jesus, cried out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you”, to which Jesus replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the

Word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:27–28). Mary was called blessed, not so much because Jesus was her Son, but because Jesus was her Lord. She carried Jesus in her womb as her Son for nine months, but she carries Jesus in her heart as her Lord forever. She is truly a blessed woman.

Mary’s blessings can be ours too. Note that Gabriel’s salutation of Mary applies to all believers. We are highly favoured as Mary was (Ephesians 1:6), the Lord is with us (Matthew 28:20), and we are blessed in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). You and I can also be God-favoured and God-blessed persons. How absolutely wonderful!

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Recall your ideas of God and your faith (or lack of it) when you were a teenager. Reflect on how Mary expressed her faith in God when God sent her a messenger. What lessons can we learn from her?
  2. Study Mary's song. What does it say about her and her experience of God? Why is it difficult to surrender to God especially when His plans for us do not make sense to us?
  3. Why was Mary called blessed? In what ways does the world's idea of blessedness differ from God's pronouncement of blessedness? In what ways is your life a blessed one?
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## FOUR



# Joseph and Mary

Joseph and Mary were a young couple living in the little town of Nazareth. Simple and godly. As young persons, they would have harboured the kind of dreams young people have—of a good life, a happy family and being a blessing to others. When they were betrothed, it is likely that they knew each other and had seen each other for some years. The betrothal period was to last for one year when, though they were committed to each other, they were not to have any sexual intimacy. They were good people and followed the laws of God and of man.

## JOSEPH'S PREDICAMENT

Then Joseph had a rude shock. He found out that Mary, his betrothed bride, was pregnant. The conclusion seemed obvious: Mary was guilty of a sinful act and the evidence of her act was now clearly seen. What would Joseph do? Joseph must have been looking forward to married life

with the lovely Mary, and she seemed to be such a nice girl. As her betrothed groom, he must have looked at her lovingly, returning her loving glances. Feelings of love were growing in their hearts like young plants growing in the rain and sunshine.

And then this largely scandalous disappointment turned up like a hammer to shatter Joseph's dreams into pieces. What should Joseph do? How ought one to make a decision in a situation like this?

Joseph knew what the religious tradition was. In Old Testament Law, a betrothed was treated like a married woman (Deuteronomy 22:22–29). A betrothed woman who has an unlawful physical relationship was guilty of adultery and would be punished accordingly. Tradition held that when a betrothed man finds his partner guilty of “something indecent”, a public trial was needed, followed by public disgrace and a divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1).

But Joseph was not only a righteous man, he was a reasonable one. Reason tempers justice with mercy. The just man, in fact, is the righteous man who acts justly and mercifully. Thus, Joseph wanted to give Mary a private divorce (before two witnesses) and save them both shame and trauma (Matthew 1:19). He did not want to put Mary through the agony of a public trial and public disgrace. There was no point in putting Mary through such a public ordeal. Nothing would be gained by it; perhaps Joseph's

budding love for Mary helped him to think of a kinder and more considerate response. He could not understand why Mary did what she did, but he was concerned for her and wanted to minimise the damage.

It was at this point that Joseph had a strange experience. He had a dream in which an angel of the Lord appeared to him with a strange and astounding message. “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20–21).

The angel addressed Joseph as a “son of David” and told him that Mary was pregnant not because she had sinned but because what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit. This child would be called Jesus because He would save His people from their sins. This was a divine child, an unusual child and this childbirth would be a unique event in history. There was nothing in history or biology to compare it with. Joseph was therefore to take Mary home and not divorce her. Otherwise, this special child would be an illegitimate one, and as Messiah, He has to come from the line of David; Joseph was a son of David. God was organising everything according to His plans, which may not be easy to understand but must be embraced in faith.

Joseph woke up, believed what he had experienced and acted upon it. But can we trust all our experiences? Especially the strange ones? How do we know that something is from God or that God has spoken? In Matthew's account of Joseph's personal dilemma and his unusual dream, before he describes how Joseph woke up later and acted on the instructions of the angel, Matthew notes that the birth of Jesus was according to biblical prophecy: "The virgin will be with child" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22–23). It is likely that Joseph being a godly and righteous man also knew the Scriptures. In his mind, he would have processed the fact that his strange experience was actually foretold in the Scriptures. That settled it.

Tradition, reason and experience are useful when we face predicaments. But Scripture should always have the last word, as it sheds light on our paths. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).

### A LOVING COUPLE

After thinking through his personal dilemma and resolving it with the help of God's intervention and revelation, Joseph "took Mary home as his wife" (Matthew 1:24). No details are given of the marriage

ceremony, but in Jewish culture, it must have been quite a celebration. Thirty years later, when Mary went to a wedding feast in Cana with Jesus, she would have remembered her own wedding feast when she and Joseph were married. They had a secret that they shared in love, for they knew that God had chosen their home for His Son. They were not able to explain this to all the wedding guests, but they knew that their marriage and their home had been given a special blessing from God.

There is no record of any conversations that the couple had in their married life, but we can be quite sure that such conversations were marked with love, consideration, mutual respect and care. Their actions are evidence of their love for each other. When Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to be registered in the Roman census, he and Mary would have known that it was a most inconvenient time, for Mary was in an advanced stage of her pregnancy. But perhaps their godliness and knowledge of Scripture would have told them that the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem, according to biblical prophecy. Trusting God, they dutifully trekked their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem through the hills.

The shortest journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, through unfriendly Samaritan territory, would be about 80 miles or 130 km. Because of the census there may have been significant numbers of people travelling, and

the couple may have joined a caravan—it was a safer way to travel. Alternatively, they would have taken a route that avoided Samaria, by going east to the Jordan River and then down the Jordan valley towards Jericho and then up the hills to Bethlehem. It has been etched in the popular imagination that Mary sat on a donkey that was led by Joseph who walked all the way. A donkey is not mentioned in Scripture, and it was the result of later Christian tradition. It is possible that the couple walked all the way, a journey that would have taken about a week, considering Mary's condition. Or, it could be that Joseph did indeed find a donkey to make the journey easier for Mary. Whatever the case, he must have carried out the responsibility lovingly and made sure that Mary was alright.

## DELIVERY IN BETHLEHEM

They arrived in Bethlehem in the nick of time. The time of delivery had arrived and they must have looked desperately for accommodation so that Mary could safely and comfortably deliver the child, in privacy. We often tell the story of the inn during Christmas. Is it true that when Jesus was about to be born, Joseph and Mary could not find any room at the local inns? Were they turned away by some heartless innkeeper? Or, perhaps the innkeeper,

with some pity, suggested that they spend the night at the stable? Such ideas are put to rest by noting that Joseph and Mary probably stayed in a relative's house. It was an affront to a relative if one were to stay at an inn; it was likely that there were no inns in Bethlehem like our inns or hotels today. The Greek word (*kataluma*) that is translated as "inn" in Luke 2:7 actually means "guest room". It is the same word used by Luke in Luke 22:11, where it is translated as "guest room". The word for "inn" is a different one (*pandacheion*), as in the story of the Good Samaritan, where it refers to a roadside inn for travellers (Luke 10:34).<sup>1</sup>

It is likely that Jesus was born in the house (Matthew 2:11) of a relative, and because there was no space in the guest room, Mary and Joseph spent the night where the manger was. It was common to have the manger not in a separate stable but in the main living room, where the animals were brought in at night, or in a backroom of the house.

In this case, Joseph must have located a relative, and God must have provided a place for Mary to deliver the child. Perhaps there was also someone who, like a midwife, helped to deliver the child. Whether Joseph personally helped in the actual delivery or not, we can be sure that he was concerned for Mary and the baby, and was close by. The first cry of the baby would have made

both Joseph and Mary smile, as they looked at the God-Child with wonder and awe. Mary wrapped the baby in cloths and placed Him in a manger.

That night they had visitors. A group of simple shepherds turned up, breathless, for they had hurried there (Luke 2:16). They told a wonderfully incredible story of how an angel of the Lord appeared to them as they were watching over their flocks at night. The angel told them: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:10–12). Then suddenly the sky was ablaze with angels who sang a heavenly song: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).

By now Joseph and Mary were getting used to seeing or hearing about angels. They knew they were right in the middle of an incredible story scripted by the living God. It was a tender moment of silence when the shepherds found the baby just as the angel had told them. Mary and Joseph must have quietly rejoiced, for it was further confirmation from heaven that they were on the right path and in God’s will. What they were witnessing was something quietly spectacular.



The shepherds left praising God and telling others their astounding story. “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). No doubt there would have been times when Mary and Joseph would have had quiet chats under the star-filled skies about the wonder of that night when heaven broke through into earth, and they had ringside seats.

As they gazed at the Holy Child, they would have held hands in a moment of worship and surrender, awe and wonder that the Almighty God was so real in their lives, having chosen them to be part of His greatest work in history.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the relationship between Joseph and Mary? What evidence can you find of their love for each other? What can we learn from them?
  2. Imagine what kind of conversations Joseph and Mary would have had. What possible differences of opinion could they have had? How do words and deeds influence a relationship?
  3. Think of an instance when you had to work out how to deal with a predicament. How did Scripture, tradition, reason and experience help you? Why is Scripture always paramount?
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# The First Temple Visit

Like all Jewish boys, the infant Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day, according to the Law (Leviticus 12:3) and God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:12). Did the baby boy cry out in pain? He must have, for Jesus had emptied himself and fully taken on humanity (Philippians 2:6–8). This painful cry must have been the earliest of signs of the full humanity of Jesus. He was fully divine and fully human. There is no one in history like Him, and we can understand why the church through the centuries has struggled to comprehend how He could be both God and man. It is one of the deepest paradoxes in human thought.

## WHO IS THIS CHILD?

The early church in the first few centuries spent considerable energy debating how Jesus could be both God and man. It was sufficiently clear that Jesus was the

Son of God, yet how He could also fully be a man was a profound enigma that the best of minds in the early church struggled with. In the first general Council of Nicaea in the year AD 325, faced with the challenge of the Arian heresy (led by Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria who claimed that Jesus was less than God), the 318 bishops who gathered there confirmed the biblical faith that Jesus was fully God. Playing a key role at the Council was Athanasius, another presbyter from Alexandria who later became its bishop. Athanasius showed that Jesus had to be fully God and fully man if He were to be the Saviour of humankind.<sup>1</sup> In the words of the Athanasian Creed, Jesus is “Perfect God, and perfect man”. Only God can save us, for all human beings have sinned and are in need of salvation, being incapable of saving themselves. And Jesus had to be fully human if He were to die as a sinless human being in place of the rest of sinful humankind. He had to pay the wages of sin (death) on our behalf. Later, the great Church Father, Gregory of Nazianzus helpfully pointed out, “What is not assumed is not healed”.<sup>2</sup> Jesus had to be fully human in order to bring full salvation to the whole human being.

Thus the baby would have cried out in pain. The circumcision was necessary because Jesus had to go through the life of a faithful Israelite. In fact He was the only truly faithful Israelite in history. He became the true Israel of God, faithful to Him and perfectly keeping the

covenant in righteousness. Later in His ministry, Jesus made it clear that He came to earth not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17). Jesus kept the Law perfectly, and therefore through His obedience He became the “source of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9).

This truth would have emerged slowly in the understanding of Joseph and Mary. It is a strange and unique experience to have God as your child! No parent could easily process that strange thought. Mary and Joseph were pious Jews who pursued righteousness. They sought to obey the Law and therefore Mary waited out her purification period of 33 days before venturing into the temple. This was required by the Law of Moses (Leviticus 12:4). The whole period after childbirth inclusive of the eight days before the child’s circumcision and the 33 days of purification was 40 days.

At the end of this period, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple to “present him to the Lord”, again in accordance to the Law that stipulated that “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord” (Luke 2:22–24; Exodus 13:2, 12). God chose the home for His Son carefully and ensured that the couple had godly piety as they sought to faithfully observe the Law.

And again according to the Law the parents were expected to make an offering to God. They were to offer a year-old lamb as a burnt offering and a young pigeon or

dove as a sin offering. But if the family could not afford a lamb, they could substitute it with a dove or pigeon (Leviticus 12:6–8). That Joseph and Mary offered a pair of birds (Luke 2:24) suggests that they were relatively poor. But they were eager to obey every stipulation of the Law.

Mary may have remembered and recited Psalm 116, a psalm that has been used in the church for the “churaching of women” as part of a ceremony that welcomes a woman back to the congregation after her confinement period following childbirth. It gives thanks to the Lord for hearing the cry of His servant and for rescuing the servant from death. It declares liturgical acts that the worshipper can now participate in the congregation: “I will lift up the cup of my salvation... I will fulfil my vows... I will sacrifice a thank offering” (Psalm 116:13, 17). The worshipper, in thanksgiving, surrenders to God’s goodness and care: “I am your servant” (Psalm 116:16), the very words Mary said when Gabriel told her about the birth of her heaven-conceived Son.

## TWO ELDERLY PROPHETS

There in the temple courts, the family of Jesus met two elderly prophets, a man and a woman. The woman’s name was Anna and she was 84 years old. The man

was Simeon, and though his age is not mentioned, the text suggests that he was an elderly saint (“It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah”, see Luke 2:26). They were part of a righteous remnant in Israel, just like Mary and Joseph, who would have been greatly comforted to meet fellow believers.

Simeon was a “righteous and devout” man living in Jerusalem, who was “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25), which means that he was waiting for the coming of God’s promised Messiah. He was a man full of the Holy Spirit who made him enter the temple courts, and when he saw Jesus, he eagerly took the baby in his arms and prophesied:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of  
all nations:  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel.”  
(Luke 2:29–32)

This was a remarkable prophecy, uttered by old Simeon with great confidence and joy. He saw Jesus as the Messiah who would bring salvation not only to Israel

but also the Gentiles, for He was indeed God's Saviour for the whole world. The parents " marvelled at what was said" about Jesus (Luke 2:33). Again and again, in the short course of a few weeks, they had heard extraordinary things about this child that was theirs. How could they not believe? They had witnessed the miracle of His birth. And God was repeatedly sending messengers to them to reiterate the message that they now had the long promised Messiah.

Then Simeon blessed them but had a particularly unsettling word for Mary. He prophesied further about Jesus: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." But the words for Mary were disturbing: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34-35). Mary knew that God had called her to be the mother of His Son, but it was not going to be just a glorious privilege; pain and suffering awaited her on account of her Son.

What Simeon prophesied was complemented by what Anna said. She was a devout servant of God who lived in the temple premises having consecrated her life to worship, prayer and fasting. She was a widow most of her long life and must have been greatly respected as a godly saint. She came to the family and Simeon, and



started to give thanks to God. She “spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). We do not have her actual words but what she said must have been similar to what Joseph and Mary had already heard about the child. It was clear that this child was the promised Messiah.

Luke tells us that “when Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their town of Nazareth” (Luke 2:39). This has to be read together with what Matthew writes. He mentions the visit of the Magi probably two years later in Bethlehem, the journey of the family to Egypt, and the subsequent return when they settled in Nazareth. Luke bypasses mentioning the intervening events. The key point here is to note how Joseph and Mary are described as having done everything as required by the Law. Their godliness and obedience of God’s Law are especially noteworthy. Luke’s account of the temple visit is peppered with the observation of how they carefully sought to fulfil the stipulations of the Law.

When they returned home to Bethlehem, Mary’s heart must have been full of what she had seen and heard. She was filled with wonder at how unique her Son was, that He was the Messiah and that she was the Messiah’s mother, a position she never expected to be blessed with. She would be the envy of all women in Israel.

## AN INTERESTING TALE

But then what old Simeon warned her about may have disturbed her. What suffering awaited her Son and her? The famous crime and mystery writer Agatha Christie published in 1965 *Star over Bethlehem*, a book of Christmas stories and poems. The title story which appears as the first story in the book provides an imaginative sub-plot in the Christmas story, though some of it is clearly at odds with the biblical accounts.<sup>3</sup>

In Christie's story, Mary is alone in the Bethlehem stable with her baby when an angel visits her. The angel tells Mary that she will be given glimpses of the future of her Son Jesus. She is then brought forward ahead in time to see her son as an adult, alone and afraid in the Garden of Gethsemane as He prays before His arrest. She then witnesses Jesus carrying His cross on His way to be executed on a cross. She sees Jesus her Son hanging on a cross and being declared by the high priest as a blasphemer. After showing this series of disturbing scenes to Mary, the angel suggests that she can choose to return the baby to God so that these agonies of the future could be avoided—presumably both for her Son and herself. At that point, Mary suddenly remembers the first scene she saw vividly. She notes the smile on her Son's face as He looked on His sleeping disciples in

Gethsemane. She also saw a smile on the face of one of the criminals who was crucified with her Son, after they had spoken. Mary then refuses the angel's offer to return her Son to God. At that point the angel vanishes suddenly just as Joseph enters the stable. The story then reveals the true identity of the angel. He is none other than Satan who had disguised himself. Vowing to return again one day to tempt Jesus Himself, he flashes in rage across the sky towards hell. His passage in the sky is mistaken for a star by the Three Wise Men.

Obviously Christie takes some artistic liberties with her story. But it is an interesting thought that after having heard that her soul would be pierced on account of what would happen to Jesus, Mary may have struggled with that prophecy. Would her faith falter? Should she abandon the child and go and live a normal life? Mary's faith and devotion to God ensured that she overcame whatever diabolical whispers may have come her way. She was an obedient servant of the Lord who had surrendered herself totally to God, come what may. God had chosen the right mother for Jesus.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus has to assume human nature in order to save human nature. Thus, He had to be fully human. Reflect on Gregory of Nazianzus' statement that "What is not assumed is not healed". In what ways was Jesus like every child and human being? In what ways was He different?
  2. Imagine what it is like to be told that your child is very special? How would you feel? Why was Mary destined to feel both pride and pain concerning her Son? What would have been her thoughts after the family left the temple?
  3. Consider Agatha Christie's fictional tale. Where do you think Satan was when Jesus was born and what do you think he was up to?
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## A Wicked King and Wise Magi

After the birth of Jesus, it is very likely that Joseph and Mary remained in Bethlehem with Jesus. They needed to be near the temple in Jerusalem to fulfil the purification rites, and Bethlehem provided convenient proximity, being only six miles from Jerusalem. For some reason or other, they continued to stay in Bethlehem for as long as two years. With pride and joy, the parents would have watched the baby grow into a toddler. They would have seen Him crawl and sit and try to stand up. Then He would have taken His first few steps. They would have heard His baby talk, His first few words, and His initial attempts to form sentences and ask questions. They would have seen familiarity as well as mystery in His eyes. An older Mary, many years later and with greater insight, would have marvelled that she had seen God walking around in her home. The first years of Jesus' life were probably very happy years as child and parents enjoyed one another.

## THE MAGI

At the end of this period, the family had some unusual visitors. These were Magi from the east who had travelled a long distance to find their way to Jesus' house. And they had a fascinating story. The word "magi" is connected to the word "magician". These men belonged to an ancient tradition of esoteric knowledge and were involved in practices such as astrology, alchemy, the study of ancient texts, magic and so on. Several of the church fathers in the early centuries translated the word "magi" as "magicians". Many of our English Bibles translate the Greek *magoi* as "wise men".

The Magi had come from somewhere in the east, perhaps Babylon, which means that they had travelled about 800 miles. How did they know about the birth of Jesus? The story may go back to the Old Testament prophet Daniel. He was one of the exiles who was brought to the ancient Kingdom of Babylon. There Daniel flourished as a wise man who could interpret dreams; yet he remained as a faithful servant of God in a pagan land. Once, Babylon's greatest king, Nebuchadnezzar, summoned astrologers to describe and interpret a disturbing dream he had. The astrologers told the king that it was an impossible task. This infuriated the troubled king who ordered the execution of "all the

wise men of Babylon” (Daniel 2:12). It was then, when facing the death sentence, that Daniel found out the king’s predicament. He then successfully identified and interpreted the king’s dream, thus saving himself and the other wise men in the kingdom.

Nebuchadnezzar was so deeply relieved and impressed that he rewarded Daniel with many positions in Babylon; he placed Daniel “in charge of all its wise men” (Daniel 2:48). He was given the title *Rab-mag*, the chief of the Magoi (Daniel 4:9; 5:11–12; Belteshazzar was Daniel’s Babylonian name). As the chief he would have taught the Magoi many things including the Hebrew Scriptures. This knowledge must have been passed down through the years. It is therefore not a surprise that the Magi who visited Jesus a few centuries after Daniel would have known the prophecy in Numbers 24:17—“A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.” Here, there is a connection made between the appearance of a star and the emergence of a future king of Israel. Obviously this would not be an ordinary king, considering the nature of the prophecy.

The Magi saw the star in the east where they came from. Recognising this as a cosmic omen and connecting it with Numbers 24:17, they decided to embark on their long journey which would have taken several months to find the newborn king. They naturally arrived in Jerusalem, at King Herod’s palace. Where else would one

find a newborn king? So they asked Herod, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (Matthew 1:2). When Herod heard the question, he was “disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”

## HEROD, THE NOT SO GREAT

Jesus was born when Herod was king of Judea. He was known for his political shrewdness and, as an intensely insecure person and a megalomaniac, he embarked on many great building projects—hence the title, Herod the Great.

Herod was born in 73 BC to Antipater, his Idumean father (descendent of Esau) and an Arabian mother. Antipater was a politically agile operator and got into the good books of powerful leaders in Rome. He was given Roman citizenship and managed to get Herod appointed as the governor of Galilee. Herod’s brother Phasael became tetrarch of Jerusalem. When Cassius and Brutus (who killed Julius Caesar) raised taxes in the Roman provinces to help finance their battle with Roman generals Octavian and Mark Anthony, Antipater and his sons had to impose heavy taxation on the people. In the trouble that followed, Antipater was killed.

When Cassius and Brutus were finally defeated by Octavian (who later became Augustus Caesar) and



Mark Anthony, Herod managed to persuade Octavian and Anthony that his father was forced to take the side of Augustus' enemies. Somehow he managed to convince them and was rewarded with the title Tetrarch of Galilee. Meanwhile Herod had killed the murderer of his father.

Together with his brother Phasaël, Herod was the real power in Judea and Galilee. The Jewish leader, Hyrcanus was only a figurehead. The Jews resented the fact that Herod was not even a Jew, though his father had worshipped at the temple as a convert. When war broke out between the Romans and the Parthians to the east, the Jews sided with the latter. Hyrcanus' nephew Antigonus, who long had political ambitions, became the king in Jerusalem and Phasaël committed suicide. His position severely threatened, Herod fled to Rome and managed to persuade Octavian and the Senate to restore him. Accordingly Mark Anthony, who was the Roman leader in the east, escorted Herod back, defeated Antigonus and had Herod elevated to the throne in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile Herod had married Mariamne, Hyrcanus' daughter, and thus claimed continuity with Jewish royalty. He also managed to secure the release of his father-in-law who had been taken away to Parthia, and made the old man his high priest, thus trying to build up his Jewish credentials. Herod got busy trying to gain popularity among the Jews at home and the Romans abroad. He

sent lavish gifts to Mark Anthony and started building programmes connected with the temple in Jerusalem.

As it turned out, Mark Anthony fell out with Octavian who defeated and deposed him. Herod had his father-in-law killed so that there would be no rival to the throne, and then hurriedly sailed to the island of Rhodes to meet Octavian. There Herod, who had been close to Mark Anthony, professed his loyalty to him but now also professed his new loyalty to Octavian, who was impressed with Herod's audacity and persuasive powers. Now as the new emperor Augustus, he rewarded the sly Herod with more territory.

Herod earned a reputation as a great builder. Most of the time, he embarked on building projects to satisfy his own ego and materialistic pursuits or to pacify his subjects to earn their allegiance. In Jerusalem, he began to rebuild the temple. The second temple built by the exiles who returned from Babylon was a rather humble building standing on the plateau of Mt Moriah. Herod dreamt of a huge transformation of the temple involving a massive building project. He constructed a large platform on the hill using huge and heavy blocks, on which the temple would stand. It is known as the Temple Mount. When the temple was destroyed by the Roman general Titus, what remained of the temple complex were the supporting walls of the platform built by Herod. The Western Wall, being considered the

closest to the original location of the Holy of Holies in the temple, has become the holiest shrine for Jews today.

While Herod reconstructed the temple, he had made an agreement with the ruling religious authorities that the temple sacrifices would continue uninterrupted and that the temple itself would be refurbished by the priests themselves. Herod began his work on the temple in 20 BC and it took many years to complete. When Jesus began His public ministry He visited the temple. There He was asked by the Jews to show a sign of His authority, to which He replied that if the temple was destroyed, He would raise it again in three days. His listeners then replied that it had taken 46 years to build the temple; how could Jesus raise it in three days? (John 2:18–20). Because of the massive nature of Herod's temple project, it took many years and may have been completed just before Jesus began His ministry, which means that work continued even after Herod died in 4 BC. It is believed that the bulk of the work was completed in the first few years.

The first century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, mentions that the temple project was Herod's greatest and most impressive among his many building ventures.<sup>1</sup> It was his masterpiece and crowning achievement. No doubt it was very impressive, so much so that the disciples were filled with lavish praise: "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

(Mark 13:1; cf. Matthew 24:1). Jesus pointed to the great buildings and said, “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” Jesus was not as impressed by Herod’s buildings as His disciples were. Later, His enemies would misquote Him to trump up some charges against Him (Matthew 26:61; Jesus never said that *He* would destroy the temple—in fact He had His own holy body in mind, which would be killed and raised from the dead in three days. Later Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6:19, extended the idea to declare that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit). Jesus did not think much of Herod’s achievements for the late king’s faith was highly questionable. Though he had rebuilt the temple, he had also built several temples for the worship of pagan idols. He was fond of pagan Greek ways and this earned him the disgust of orthodox Jews. He had also placed an image of the Roman eagle on one of the gates of the temple, which caused a lot of resentment from pious Jews.

Josephus tells us that Herod built magnificent buildings that were meant to last so that he would be remembered for perpetuity.<sup>2</sup> Such huge building projects required heavy taxation and the abuse of workers. There was no short supply of cruelty on the part of Herod. He continued to build throughout his long reign in cities such as Caesarea, Jericho and Samaria. He also built

magnificent fortresses such as the famous Masada, where he built a luxurious complex for himself.

Herod was not only a man with an oversized ego but he was also highly insecure and paranoid. He was especially afraid of losing his royal position and he dealt cruelly with any perceived threat to his throne. Even if it came from his own family. He had no qualms about killing his own wife and some of his sons. Near the time of the birth of Jesus, he had two of his sons Aristobolus and Antipater executed in 7 BC and 4 BC respectively. Emperor Augustus was known to have joked using a pun that it was better to be Herod's pig (*hus* in Latin) than his son (*huios*).<sup>3</sup>

Herod also murdered Mariamne his wife. He had a love-hate relationship with her but she hated him. All in all, he had 10 wives, none of whom were happy, which is not surprising. Herod was a cruel ruler who mercilessly put many people to death. He probably destroyed the monastery belonging to the Qumran community. He was ruthless in utilising mercenaries and thugs to eliminate his opponents.

Herod died of a horrible illness which ate away his intestines—scholars think it is Fournier gangrene, a necrotising illness of the perineum. In simple language, the flesh around the anus, rectum and surrounding parts get infected and rot. Not only Herod, but his grandson

Herod Agrippa (“he was eaten by worms and died”, Acts 12:23) also suffered from this disease. The Bible does not give details of how Herod died, but Josephus offers the terrible details and suggests that Herod was being punished for his many heartless sins; he suffered from burning fever, ulcerated entrails, foul discharges, convulsions, stench, etc.<sup>4</sup> It was so bad that Herod became demented and attempted suicide. He died shortly thereafter.

Yet, Herod is known as “the Great”—but it was a statement about his buildings, not his character. He left behind many sons who took over power. The Herodian dynasty lasted a few generations, and we see some of the Herods in the New Testament: Herod’s son Herod Antipas who killed John the Baptist (Mark 6:16) and mocked Jesus before His crucifixion (Luke 23:11), Herod Agrippa I, Herod’s grandson who killed the apostle James (Acts 12), and Herod’s great grandson, Herod Agrippa II who had an incestuous relationship with his sister Bernice and who questioned and examined Paul (Acts 25:23–26:32). It was a highly dysfunctional family and many details are simply unpalatable. The patriarch of this family of unruly rulers was Herod the Great.

It was to this Herod that the Magi came from the east.

## A DISTURBED PALACE AND CITY

When the Magi approached Herod and enquired about the newborn king of the Jews, Herod was troubled. We should not be surprised that the insecure and paranoid Herod would react in this way. Where and when did this happen? He must immediately deal with this for he would not accept any challenge to his throne. We can excuse the pagan Magi for not knowing all of Scripture. They apparently knew enough to understand the connection between the star and the birth of a significant new king of the Jews (Numbers 24:17). That they were not aware of what the prophet Micah had written is clear from what happened. “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Matthew 2:6; Micah 5:2).

Herod did not know the Scriptures too—which is not unexpected because of his fake religiosity. So he gathered the chief priests and teachers of the Law to find out where the Messiah was to be born. At least Herod knew about the Messiah. And the religious leaders knew the Scriptures. They quickly identified Bethlehem as the place of the Messiah’s birth. Herod was not sure if the Messiah had really been born. Therefore, he decided on a ploy to use the Magi to find out.

He met them secretly, asked them when the star had appeared and then told them to go to Bethlehem. Why did he meet them secretly? Perhaps he did not want the news to spread, lest his subjects abandon him in favour of the new king. He told the Magi to report to him after they had found the new king “so that I too may go and worship him” (Matthew 2:8). Herod was not thinking of homage but homicide. He was planning to get rid of the new challenge to his throne, never mind if he was the Messiah. Herod did not fear God or care for His ways.

The text in Matthew says that all Jerusalem was also disturbed together with Herod (Matthew 2:3). Does this mean that the Jews in Jerusalem felt the same way as Herod felt when he met with the Magi? It is possible that the visit of the foreign dignitaries was highly noticeable in what was after all a relatively small city. News may have spread that these men were looking for a newborn king of the Jews. Some may have thought of the Messiah, for under the Roman occupation there were Jews who dreamt of a grand liberation under the Messiah. Herod was too much of a Roman stooge to be of any use in this regard. But they also knew what type of man Herod was. What would he do with such news? The city would be thrown into a frenzy because of the severe insecurities of its king. But Herod chose to deal with the situation quietly—as he had in mind dark schemes. Hence he met with the Magi



secretly and sent them on to Bethlehem (the fewer people who knew about this the better for Herod).

## THE MAGI MEET THE NEW KING

After meeting with the tormented and wicked King Herod, the Magi were on their way to see the heavenly and glorious king. Traditionally and popularly, there were three Magi—three wise kings as we sing in the hymn “We Three Kings of Orient Are”. But the Bible does not mention how many Magi there were. They brought three gifts (or three kinds of gifts) but there could have been more than three men. In fact, it was likely that it was quite a large entourage. They would have had assistants, guards and others accompanying them. Hence, when they came to Jerusalem, their entourage must have been quite impressive and Herod took them seriously and treated them with diplomatic courtesy.

The Magi followed the star, and “it went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was” (Matthew 2:9). Many theories have been put forth to explain the star, that it was a comet, or a special alignment of celestial bodies, a supernova and so on. But none of them is totally satisfactory as an explanation. Perhaps it is best to think of the star not as a natural phenomenon but as a supernatural one, like the pillars of cloud and

fire during the Exodus. For the star to lead the Magi so accurately, it must have been a supernatural phenomenon meant to guide them to where the child Jesus was. No natural star in the sky would have been able to achieve that. If we understand parallax in physics, we would know this.

The star stopped over the house where Jesus was staying with His parents. There are a number of facts in the text that suggest that Jesus was probably almost two years old by now. Firstly, a house is mentioned—not a stable (Matthew 2:10). Secondly the Greek word *paidion*, used to describe Jesus is generally used to indicate a little child. The word *brephos* used by Luke (2:16) is the word for a baby. Thirdly, Herod ordered the killing of all boys in Bethlehem aged two and below (Matthew 2:16, more on this later). Herod had earlier enquired of the Magi on when the star had first appeared to them; he must have worked out the arithmetic.

We can deduce that Joseph and Mary had decided to stay in Bethlehem for the time being, for as long as two years. During that time, they lived quietly, away from the political and religious rulers in Jerusalem. But when the Magi visited them, things changed. Herod the tyrant was now alerted and things would not be the same.

## GIFTS FIT FOR THE SON OF GOD

The Magi saw Jesus with His mother (where was Joseph?) and they “bowed down and worshipped him” (Matthew 2:11). We are not sure how much they really understood what God was doing or what the true identity of Jesus (as the God-Man) was. But they probably knew enough to pay homage to the two-year-old child. It must have been quite a sight to see grown men, who were dignitaries, kneeling before a little boy.

They opened the presents they had brought for Jesus. These included gold, frankincense and myrrh. Preachers and Bible commentators have offered spiritual meaning to these gifts. These valuable gifts were presented in the ancient world to a king or a deity. For example, an ancient inscription exists that records that a Seleucid king offered the same three kinds of gifts to Apollo, a Greek god at his temple in Miletus in 243 BC.<sup>5</sup> The Bible itself describes a future Messianic age when gifts of gold and frankincense will be brought by nations and kings to honour the Lord (Isaiah 60:6).

Preachers have often highlighted that the gifts say something about who Jesus is. The gold represents His royalty, the frankincense His priestly role (frankincense being used in the incense in the temple in Jerusalem), and the myrrh prefiguring His unique death and embalmment.

Whether the Magi were aware of the significance of their gifts, we cannot be sure. But we can be certain that they considered their gifts as those presented to a special king. They were looking for the newborn king and they bowed before Him. That made their gifts special, well-chosen and reverently presented.

Still others see yet another possible significance of the gifts. These gifts were not useless ones like many of the gifts people get for Christmas or birthdays—gifts that are either gathering dust in cupboards or storerooms, or recirculated to go to somebody else’s cupboard or storeroom. No, the Magi’s gifts were likely to be practical gifts too. They would have certainly proved useful to the family as they fled to Egypt. They could have traded them for food and other necessities on the way and during their stay in Egypt.

## THE MAGI WERE WISE MEN

After they had seen the child, the Magi would have planned to return to Jerusalem on their way home, as requested by King Herod. Herod must have been waiting anxiously for their return to carry out his evil plan. But something else happened that diverted the Magi from this plan.

The Magi had a dream during which they were warned not to return to Herod (Matthew 2:12). We

do not have other details in the Bible. Perhaps an angel spoke to them the way Joseph had been spoken to in his dream. Whatever it was, the Magi took the dream seriously; perhaps being experienced Magi, they already sensed Herod's evil ways, and the dream just confirmed their suspicions. They then decided to return home bypassing Jerusalem and Herod altogether.

How did Matthew know about all the details related to the Magi and about the secret meeting they had with Herod? It is likely that they themselves recounted all the details to Joseph and Mary, and the details got passed down to Matthew and other Christian leaders. When they packed up to return home, they must have met Joseph and Mary to bid farewell and told them about their dream. This may have caused some consternation in the couple as they wondered what would happen next.

The Magi were indeed wise men, to be able to discern the significance of the star that appeared to them, to understand in some measure the significance of Jesus, and to bypass Herod so that they would not end up as accomplices to his evil plans and deeds. They could smell an evil man. They were wise.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Matthew includes the story of the Magi? Who do you think would have told him the story?
  2. Reflect on the character of Herod—in what ways does he represent the sinful self that wants to rule and reacts with stubbornness and cruelty when challenged? Where does true greatness lie in a man's life?
  3. Reflect on the Magi and their search for Jesus. What was their attitude and how were they guided? What do you think of their gifts and their homage to Jesus?
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# The Refugee Family

A cursory reading of Matthew's account of the flight of Joseph and Mary to Egypt may not capture the urgency and the grave danger that Jesus faced. The dream of the Magi started an urgent process that culminated in the family embarking on a long journey to safety. It is possible that Herod would not have left things to chance: He may have sent some spies to follow the Magi as they travelled to Bethlehem. When the child was found, the men would have made preparations to return to the palace to report back to their unstable and cruel king. It was now a matter of hours and a few days before disaster would strike Bethlehem. Something urgent needed to be done.

## THE MAGI'S DISTURBING DREAM

The Magi were preparing to return to Jerusalem to report to Herod. But their worst suspicions were

confirmed when they dreamt, whether it was one of them or all of them having the same dream we are not sure, that they should give Jerusalem and its wicked king a wide berth and return home. Most likely a heavenly messenger spoke to them in their dream and they, being probably knowledgeable about dreams, knew at once the implications and urgency of what they had experienced. They must have quietly packed their bags and slipped away in the middle of the night without wasting any further time. If Herod's spies were around, they were probably sound asleep, thinking that all was going as planned—they would follow the Magi back to Jerusalem.

### JOSEPH'S DREAM

Probably that very same night, Joseph too had a dream. An angel of the Lord appeared to the slumbering Joseph and gave him urgent instructions. “‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’” (Matthew 2:13). There was no time to sleep; the message was so urgent that Joseph responded immediately, and during that night the family left for Egypt. Joseph and Mary did not have to spend time discussing where to go, for the angel had given clear instructions. All they needed was to pack up for the



urgent trip. If you are poor, it is not too difficult to pack up; it would be a simple and quick task.

It is interesting how Joseph, like his namesake in the Old Testament, was a “dreamer” (Genesis 37:5–11). The Old Testament Joseph dreamt symbolic dreams that needed interpretation. He dreamt in pictures while the New Testament Joseph had more direct and straightforward dreams. In his dreams, he heard God’s angel speak to him clearly. It appears that both Josephs had a special communication channel with heaven through their dreams. Whether we should also look for such an experience as a normative pattern is questionable. God may speak through dreams when we are asleep, especially when during our waking hours we are too preoccupied to be sensitive to what He is trying to say to us. But not all dreams are of this nature. Many dreams seem to be merely the brain’s way of clearing data. Or, some believe that the person’s unconscious processes deep feelings through the symbols and emotions of dreams.

But if we go just by our dreams, we can end up in error or trouble. God’s warning through the prophet Jeremiah cautions us:

I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, “I had a dream! I had a dream!” How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the

delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the Lord. “Is not my word like fire,” declares the Lord, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Jeremiah 23:25–29)

Here ephemeral dreams are contrasted with the sure Word of God. Not that God cannot communicate through dreams, as attested by the experience of the Josephs. But we must always stand on the sure Word of God. In Joseph’s case, his dream was like a vision where his attention turned to spiritual realities. He was, therefore, able to hear the angel speak and the angel brought God’s word to him.

## THE REFUGEE FAMILY

The couple and the child became a refugee family, fleeing for safety away from the cruel sword of a despotic king. They are one family among so many families who have fled for similar reasons; some have escaped, others have

perished either by sword or by hunger or disease during escape. Even today, there are millions of refugee families fleeing for personal safety. Many are housed in refugee camps amid wretched living conditions. Untold suffering has been experienced and is being experienced by such refugee families.

It is comforting to know that the Saviour of humankind Himself was a helpless child refugee, that He perfectly understands the experience of millions of unfortunate people on earth. He must have been awakened gently by his parents in the middle of the night and He must have known that something important had cropped up. The quiet whispers of the parents and the sense of urgency that their actions revealed would have told Him that it was a moment of great danger.

How did they travel? Paintings of the Flight to Egypt over the centuries have usually featured Mary seated on a donkey with baby Jesus in her arms, and Joseph walking beside them. That may very well have been the case. But we cannot be sure. Scripture is silent about how they got to Egypt. If Jesus was a two-year-old child, was He carried in some way, either by Joseph or Mary? Perhaps they took turns to carry Him especially over difficult terrain. Or, He could have walked some of the way; there were no prams in those days. Two-year-old boys do not like to be carried for long.

## ON THE OLD WELL-TRAVELLED WAY

The way between Judea and Egypt had seen a lot of traffic in history. Abraham arrived in Canaan from the Euphrates and immediately experienced famine. “Abraham went down to Egypt to live there for a while” (Genesis 12:10). His great-grandson Joseph was brought by slave traders into Egypt along the same way. It was on that road too that Joseph’s hungry brothers travelled to Egypt to get grain for their families suffering from famine in Canaan. It was the same route that the entire family, including Jacob took to settle down in Egypt. There they remained for about 400 years and they eventually suffered ill-treatment and slavery in the hands of the Egyptians.

God then sent Moses to deliver His people. Moses himself had been rescued as a helpless baby from certain death. The cruel Pharaoh had issued an order around the time of Moses’ birth that all male Hebrew babies must be killed (Exodus 1:16). God intervened through the actions of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah who feared God and spared boys like Moses. Through the faith-filled actions of Moses’ mother and sister, Moses was placed in a basket on the Nile and found by Pharaoh’s daughter who liked the child so much that she adopted him. God preserved Moses in the house of Pharaoh, the very Pharaoh who

had conceived of the ethnic cleansing measures. And so it was that Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt. Scholars are divided as to which route they took but again Israel travelled from Egypt to Canaan. Centuries later, the prophet Jeremiah was forced to travel to Egypt with the terrified but disobedient group of Jews who had acted contrary to the prophet's advice and were facing the wrath of Babylon after killing the Babylon-appointed governor (Jeremiah 43:4–7).

It was on this oft-trodden path by significant forebears that Jesus and his parents travelled. Extra-biblical sources such as the New Testament apocrypha record all kinds of stories connected with this particular journey, such as the palms trees bowing before the family. Many of these stories are quite fanciful and have to be read cautiously. The journey was probably quite uneventful; at least the biblical account keeps details to the barest minimum.

Matthew is keen to show how the life of Jesus fulfilled many Old Testament Messianic prophecies. He saw the significance of the flight to Egypt because when Jesus returned some years later, He was fulfilling the prophecy of Hosea: “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:15). It was as if the life of Jesus was in perfect fulfilment of a divine script, parts of which can be discerned in the Old Testament.

## A PLUNGE INTO DARKNESS

Meanwhile, Bethlehem was plunged into a terrible darkness. Herod was waiting for the Magi to return to lead him to his new rival and threat to his throne. They did not turn up, of course. Perhaps the spies he sent returned to tell him the news that the Magi had secretly left for home. We wonder, if this was the case, what the fate of the poor spies was. The enraged Herod, realising that the Magi were smarter than he thought, gave quick orders for his soldiers to hurry to Bethlehem. They were to carry out a most dastardly act—to slaughter all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old and younger. This was to make sure that the newborn king who would be among them, would be killed.

What soldier would carry out such a wicked order? The soldiers that Herod sent must have been hand-picked by him. They would have been the most sadistic of his soldiers, in whose hands Herod could be sure his reprehensible order would be certainly carried out. Either these men were themselves as wicked as their master or they were not as courageous as Shiprah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives in Egypt who dared to defy the order of the ruthless Pharaoh by letting the newborn Hebrew boys live (Exodus 1:17–19).

Anka Bergman was a young Jewish woman who was sent to the Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz during

the Second World War. Her husband had been killed but she was expecting their baby, and for several months she managed to hide her pregnancy. Her time in Auschwitz was horribly difficult as she was forced to do hard labour with little nourishment. If her pregnancy was discovered, she would be immediately sent to the gas chamber, but amazingly she managed to keep her pregnancy hidden. Then Anka was deported to an extermination camp where death awaited her. She gave birth to her daughter Eva on the day of arrival. Anka was severely malnourished and her baby weighed only three pounds. Miraculously, they survived because the war came to an end just then. They managed to eventually settle in England and lived to tell their tale years later in a BBC documentary. God was still saving His children from the hands of wicked men. But for some inexplicable reason, God allowed many children to be killed in the war. It was the same in Bethlehem that fateful day.

Bethlehem had probably not seen such an atrocity where helpless young boys were killed so mercilessly. The soldiers plucked them from their screaming mothers and drove their swords through them or split them open. The helpless fathers must have watched in shock and disbelief. How can people do such things? How can such heartless brutality take place in the land of the living God?

The massacre of the boys of Bethlehem brought the town into spiritual darkness as innocent blood

splattered on its sad walls. The wailing of the mothers and grandmothers must have been unimaginable. Where could they go for justice when the king of the land behaved in such a low and deplorable way? Where would they get justice?

Again, Matthew connects this event with Old Testament prophecy. “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (Matthew 2:18; Jeremiah 31:15).

There must have been unimaginable wailing and painful and inconsolable tears that day in Bethlehem when very young lives were so brutally snuffed out. We can only comfort ourselves in knowing that those little children went directly into the loving hands of the heavenly Father, never to be injured or abused again. They were safe in the hands of Him who sent His Son to die for those boys and all their fellow human beings in this sad and disturbed world.

## LIFE IN EGYPT

Jesus and His family stayed in Egypt for some years. They had to wait till Herod was dead; as long as Herod was alive, it would be too dangerous to return. Where exactly did the family reside? The Bible is silent on this, but there are countless traditions which locate the home



of the family. In Egypt, there are many churches that purport to mark the site where the Holy Family lived. Herod died in 4 BC, which means that Jesus probably spent some time in Egypt. Did he learn to speak the Egyptian language?

Coptic tradition has it that the Holy Family lived in Egypt for three and a half years (concurrent with Hippolytus of Rome in his Commentary on Matthew in the early third century).<sup>1</sup> During this time, the Holy Family travelled to several towns in Upper and Lower Egypt. As a result there are many monasteries and churches that are said to mark those sites visited by them.<sup>2</sup> There are stories of miracles that took place when the Holy Family visited places, though many of these stories may be embellished. The Holy Family is believed to have visited Cairo and it is claimed by Coptic Christians that there is a street there (Eid Street/Shek El-Te'eban Street), where it is impossible to leaven bread though there is no such problem in nearby streets. Apparently, the Holy Family visited the site, requested for bread, but were turned away by the people there—thus is the phenomenon explained.<sup>3</sup>

## THE RETURN TO NAZARETH

Joseph dreamt again, and an angel spoke to him, informing him that “those who were trying to take the

child's life are dead" and therefore he was to pack up again and "take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel" (Matthew 2:19–20). Joseph's response to angelic messages was consistent: "So he got up" (Matthew 2:14, 21). He brought Mary and Jesus back to Israel. Notice that the phrase "the child and his mother" seems to be consistent with the fact that Jesus was not the natural child of Joseph.

The family must have planned to return to Bethlehem in Judea, but they heard that Herod's son Archelaus ruled Judea. He was not much of an improvement over his wicked father and Augustus Caesar had him removed from his position after only two years as ruler. When Joseph heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea, he "was afraid to go there" (Matthew 2:22). He was again warned in a dream, the details of which are not given, and so he took the family to Nazareth, their former place of residence. Matthew again ties this with the Old Testament to show why Jesus, though born in Bethlehem, ended up growing up and living in Nazareth. Matthew refers to the prophecy in Isaiah that the Messiah will be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23; Isaiah 40:3).

The word Nazarene here has nothing to do with the Nazirites who took special vows. Jesus was not a Nazirite but a native of Nazareth. The name Nazareth could have been derived from the Hebrew word *netzer* which

refers to a sprout. A tree is cut off and then the next day one sees a green sprout. But the sprout is considered as insignificant, a feeble thing of no consequence. Nazareth was probably considered in this same way—an obscure little village sticking out in the hills, of no importance. But biblical prophecy also talks about a messianic *netzer* that would spring up from the stump of Jesse. When Judah and the line of David is cut off, a new shoot (*netzer*) will come forth. “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1).

By connecting Jesus with the *netzer* Matthew shows the true identity of Jesus as the promised Messiah who not only came from insignificant Nazareth but Himself was the true Messiah, long promised by God. God was working out His script, slowly but surely.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think a refugee family feels? Read up on contemporary refugees in various parts of the world. What are their needs and problems? How do you think Joseph and Mary must have felt having to flee from persecution and danger? How would their lives have been disrupted? What would it be like to live in a foreign land?
  2. Herod killed the boys in Bethlehem. In what way is this sort of atrocity still going on in the world? How would you have comforted the parents of the boys killed in Bethlehem?
  3. Why was Jesus connected with Nazareth? It was hilly country; how do you think Jesus grew up in that area? Think of the other people there, the synagogue, the nearby major roads, the quiet hills, and so on. How has your own childhood home influenced you?
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## Jesus and His Parents

The Lord Jesus was at home with His family for about 30 years, a considerable length of time considering the fact that He died when He was about 33 (some scholars think He would have been in His mid-thirties). What His life was at home is the subject of much speculation as recorded in many extra-biblical sources, such as the apocryphal literature. But Scripture is silent about this whole period except for a few rare glimpses. The extra-biblical stories are often fantastical and probably developed by word of mouth as stories became embellished with religious piety and fantasy. The Gospels pay little emphasis to the childhood and youthful years of Jesus, perhaps because that would distract readers from the central message of Jesus—He was sent by the Father to save the world. Therefore, the Gospels focus on the public ministry of Jesus and more so His sufferings, death on the cross and resurrection.

## A CHILDHOOD IN A NUTSHELL

Luke simply summarises Jesus' childhood in this way: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52, ESV). That's as much as we can say about the growing up years of Jesus (apart from the visit to the temple when He was 12). But it does say something significant about the quality of Jesus' childhood years. The words used by Luke are very similar to those used to depict the childhood of Samuel, the Old Testament prophet. Samuel's mother Hannah, who was barren, prayed to God for a child, and God miraculously answered her prayer. As vowed, Hannah dedicated her son to God and allowed him to grow up in the tabernacle after he was weaned. And there, in the shadow of God's wings, "the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people" (1 Samuel 2:26).

It does tell us a few things. Firstly, the home that Joseph and Mary provided for Jesus was like the tabernacle that God provided for Samuel's religious formation. It was a godly home in which Jesus as a child could be brought up in the faith of Israel, where Scriptures were recited and taught, heartfelt prayers were said, obedience to the Law was practised, and godly virtues were palpable.

Secondly, the childhood of Jesus was exemplary. It was a period of wholesome development as Jesus grew

physically, socially and spiritually. He must have been the pride and joy of His parents as they saw blossoming before them a wholesome godly young man who feared God and lived a life full of faith and love. We cannot think that Jesus magically became what He was in later life, with no input from His parents. Countless hours of nurture, discussions, training and care must have gone into His upbringing by His godly and responsible parents. Their job would have been made easier by the ready teachability and spiritual sensitivity of their Son. Nevertheless, effort must have been put in that serves as a model for all parents aiming to bring up godly children.

## JESUS AND JOSEPH

Not a single word uttered by Joseph is recorded and preserved in the Bible. He seems to be the patron saint of strong and silent fathers. But we cannot go away with the idea that Joseph never spoke to his wife or to Jesus. He must have spoken to them. How else would he have shared his dream with Mary, or discussed their urgent escape to Egypt, or the need to return home from Egypt? And Joseph would have certainly communicated with the child who was growing up in his home. If only all his conversations were recorded for us. We can only imagine what might have transpired between Jesus and Joseph.

We can imagine Joseph and Jesus lying on the grass at the top of a hill looking at the stars in the night sky, and Joseph telling Jesus about God and His creation. He would have regaled the boy with stories he himself had heard as a boy from his father. They would have talked about the Roman occupation and how Jews felt about it, or the religious authorities and the abuses that came from them. Joseph must have been the hero of Jesus. If there was a man that the boy looked up to, it must have been his own earthly father. He was everything that a good and responsible man ought to be. Joseph must have taught Jesus about the heavenly Father, whose Law must be loved and obeyed. The Law must be written in the parent's heart and the parent must impress it on his children, talk about it at all times, when sitting at home to rest, while walking on the road and when working (Deuteronomy 6:4–9).

Joseph was a *tektōn*, a carpenter and builder. That is how he earned his living and supported the family. At an appropriate age, Jesus would have helped Joseph with his job. If Joseph worked in a workshop, the little boy would have observed the rough hands of his father gently smoothing pieces of wood. He would have begun helping out by bringing nails and tools to Joseph. Then Joseph would have allowed Jesus to do some carpentry work, knocking nails in, sawing wood, polishing surfaces.



As Jesus took on more and more of the work, he became an accomplished carpenter. His sinews grew and bulged like Joseph's. And the older man would have looked with fatherly pride at the young man, who was becoming not only godly, but also a skilled and diligent worker.

### WALKING TO WORK

During the time of Jesus there was a major city called Sepphoris, just three miles away from Nazareth. Though not identified in the Bible, Sepphoris had a long history and eventually became the administrative centre of Galilee under the Romans. As such the city had strong Greek and Roman influences. After the death of King Herod, Jewish patriots and bandits led by a man named Judas attacked the city in revolt against Herod's rule. They managed to destroy its treasury and armoury. In brutal response, the Romans sacked the city, burning much of it and selling many of its inhabitants into slavery.

After Herod's death, his son Herod Antipas was appointed as governor of Galilee. He decided to rebuild the city as his administrative centre. Much building work was going on then. At the time of Jesus, the building boom was still on and it is highly likely that Joseph saw the opportunity to make a living by finding work as a

craftsman and builder in Sepphoris.<sup>1</sup> If this was true, then Jesus would have accompanied Joseph to work in Sepphoris.

Jesus would have witnessed the way people in Sepphoris lived. The Jews there were highly influenced by pagan Greek culture. Reza Aslan describes life in Sepphoris: “Rich, cosmopolitan, deeply influenced by Greek culture, and surrounded by a panoply of races and religions, the Jews of Sepphoris were the product of the Herodian social revolution—the nouveaux riche who rose to prominence after Herod’s massacre of the old priestly aristocracy”<sup>2</sup>

Imagine Joseph and Jesus getting up early in the morning, while it was still dark, to go to work in Sepphoris. Mary would have packed lunch for them. They would then have set out to work on an hour-long journey, walking on the hills near Nazareth. What would they have talked about? What would a father and son talk about on a daily walk to work? They would have talked about almost everything: God, the temple, the Law, the people in Nazareth, righteousness, Scripture, the old prophets, the psalms, Mary, marriage, work, the Gentiles... the list can go on. On the way back from work, perhaps their walk would have been punctuated with silence as they would have been tired after a hard day’s work, each in his own reflective thoughts, occasionally sharing them with the other.

Those father-and-son walks and conversations would have remained with Jesus for a long time and would have further strengthened the frequent prayer conversations that Jesus had with His heavenly Father—on top of quiet hills, in silent wilderness, and on long roads.

## JESUS THE CARPENTER

We do not know how long Joseph lived and how he died. The biblical evidence seems to support the theory that Joseph died sometime during the growing up years of Jesus and before His public ministry. After the temple visit when Jesus was 12, we do not hear of Joseph again. He seems to disappear from the biblical narrative. It could be that he died after that. Some believe that he died when Jesus became an adult and had learnt carpentry skills from him. When Joseph died, Jesus carried on the trade of a carpenter and supported Mary and His siblings. The people of Nazareth identified Jesus as “the carpenter” when He visited the town during His ministry (Mark 6:3). At the cross, Jesus told His disciple John to take care of Mary as his own mother. He need not have done that if her husband Joseph was still alive (John 19:26–27).

For most of His earthly life, Jesus worked with His hands which must have become rough with hard work, just like the hands of Joseph. Jesus fulfilled His family

responsibilities by taking care of His mother and siblings. As the eldest son in the family, he did not shirk from His responsibilities. Later in His ministry, He condemned those who used religion as an excuse for not caring for their parents (Mark 7:10–13).

How did Jesus feel when Joseph died? The fact that Jesus wept at Lazarus' funeral (John 11:35) suggests that He was not immune to human grief, and that He would have felt the loss of His mentor and earthly father Joseph when he died. He would miss talking to him. But now He had to turn resolutely to His heavenly Father as He carried out His heavenly Father's business.

## JESUS AND MARY

Mary knew Jesus as only a mother would know her own son. She carried Him in her womb for nine months, gave birth to Him, breastfed Him till He was weaned, fed and took care of Him. She prepared His meals and made sure He had enough to eat. We do not know whether Jesus ever suffered what children go through from time to time: Fever, tummy upsets, coughs, bruises from falls and so on. If so, Mary would have been there to fuss over him, nurse Him, bandage His wounds and show concern as only a mother would. At such moments, she would have shed tears of pain because of her son's suffering, even if it was only a bruise or cut. At other times, she would have

shed tears of joy to see how well her son was growing up and how the fear of God seemed so natural to Him. In His early years, Jesus would have gone to sleep many a night listening to His mother's sweet lullaby songs.

Like Joseph, Mary was full of faith and godliness. She knew that her Son was special even though she may not have fully understood how her flesh-and-bone Son could also be divine. She knew her duty as His mother, and not only took care of Him but also taught Him all she knew about God. She must have told Him about how He was born, about the angels who were travelling between heaven and earth when He was born. She would have told Him about how angels spoke to Joseph and herself and how God had preserved the family from Herod's cruel grasp. She would also have read to Him the Scriptures and taught Him songs of praise and worship.

Many, seeing popular pictures of the Holy Family often showing them in solemn poses, may think that the home of Jesus was a stern and dull place, but that would not have been the case. Who says that godliness must be severe and stern, boring and colourless? There must have been moments of mirth and laughter in that home. That this was so can be seen in the many teachings of Jesus where there is a hint of humour. Elton Trueblood wrote the classic, *The Humour of Christ*, which dispels the notion that Jesus was a sombre and sad individual by showing that He often spoke with godly wit using

amused ironies, satires and paradoxes.<sup>3</sup> In the Appendix of Trueblood's book are 30 humorous Gospel passages for further study. We can be quite sure that Jesus grew up in a home that was not wealthy but rich with godly wit and laughter.

Some people may think that the relationship between Mary and Jesus was one long painful groan as the sword slowly pierced Mary's heart. But that cannot be true. For most of the time, Mary would have enjoyed the presence of Christ and even laughed with Him. In a scene in the film *The Passion of Christ*, Jesus, washing up after a day's work at the workshop, playfully splashes some water on Mary. That scene captures an often unappreciated dimension of the relationship between mother and son. It was precisely these precious memories of the wonderful times she shared with her delightful Son that must have made watching her Son hanging on a cross, all beaten up, bruised and dehydrated, awful to look at. Those precious moments must have made the sword that pierced her heart all the more cruelly jagged and merciless.

Mary saw her Son grow up from a helpless baby she had to wrap up in swaddling clothes to an intelligent and good-looking boy to a caring young man who was all that a mother would have wished in a son to a rugged preacher who stirred the country with revolutionary

spiritual truth to the Saviour who died for her sins on the cross to the living risen Lord worshipped by her and other fellow believers. All in one short lifetime. What a unique and amazing view Mary was blessed with!

## JOSEPH AND MARY

Jesus knew that He grew up in the best home possible on earth. His godly parents must have been a source of great joy and inspiration for Him. He would have observed how Joseph and Mary loved and cared for each other. He would have seen them talking in whispers or discussing aloud and would have known that they had mutual respect for each other. Though He remained single (as the Son of God would), He knew that marriage was a good idea and that when God instituted marriage, though it often brought heartaches and pain, Joseph and Mary's marriage was an example of how marriage should work even though people are less than perfect. The way they forgave each other and extended patience to each other, listened quietly and gave each other space, were willing to lose an argument for the sake of love, made sacrifices for the good of the other—all these showed that marriage was a good idea.

When Mary lost her husband, it must have left a big hole in her heart. She now depended on Jesus to give her

emotional support and care. When He set out for public ministry, she missed Him a lot but she knew that He had been sent for a purpose. When she lost her Son too, it was an unbearable loss, but Jesus cared for her and even on the cross, He gave her a son to take care of her. Jesus never forgot His wise and godly parents. They had put much into His life even as He eventually would give His life for them.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on how the home of Joseph and Mary was “like the house of the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:24). How do you think the parents of Jesus were a positive influence on him? What does this say about our own families?
  2. Reflect on the relationship between Jesus and Joseph. What are the most important ingredients in a father-son relationship? What conversations would they have had? In what ways would Joseph have been a hero and mentor for the young Jesus? What implications can you think of for your own family?
  3. Think about the relationship Jesus had with his mother Mary. What would have characterised their relationship? What would Jesus have learnt from Mary? What conversations would they have had? What lessons can we learn from this? How would the relationship between His parents have influenced Jesus?
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## Another Temple Visit

Joseph and Mary were pious Jews who took their faith seriously. It was their practice to make the 80-mile journey to Jerusalem every year for the Feast of the Passover (Luke 2:41). The Old Testament requires Jews to visit the temple three times a year, but this was very difficult for Jews who lived far away from Jerusalem, especially for those who had inadequate financial means to make such frequent journeys. Many, therefore, ended up visiting the temple once a year, for the most important festival in the annual Jewish calendar. This was the wish of every devout Jew.

Later in His life, Jesus Himself made it a point to visit the temple for the Passover feast. We know from hindsight, that this was especially significant in the case of Jesus because He Himself was the once-for-all Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for our sins, and whose blood saves us from eternal death. Jesus as the Lamb from heaven made all other sacrificial Passover lambs redundant.

Paul, as the servant of Christ sent to the Gentiles, also made it a point to visit the temple for the Passover (Acts 21:1–15). Besides habitual piety, Paul had new missional motives. Jerusalem would be swollen with pilgrims who were there for the Passover. What a great opportunity to preach the Gospel and declare Jesus to them.

### A BAR MITZVAH?

It is not known whether Jesus accompanied His parents every year for the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. He probably did. But this particular visit is highlighted by Luke and offers a rare glimpse of Jesus as a youth. What was Luke's purpose in including this story from the life of Jesus, a story that is not found in the other Gospels? Luke places the story between the infant narratives and the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. It serves as a transition point and marks a significant change in the course of Jesus' life. In some ways, it is a coming-of-age story.

Many cultures have their own coming-of-age rituals. In many modern wealthy societies, one comes of age when he gets driving lessons or is allowed to go on his first date. In other more traditional societies, the equivalent ritual would be a trip to the forest with the men. In Jewish

culture, the coming-of-age ritual is the Bar Mitzvah. When a boy turns 13, he becomes a Bar Mitzvah (son of the commandment) because he has reached the age of personal accountability. He is expected to be answerable to God for his actions, to study the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), to find a trade and to act responsibly. The boy becomes a responsible member of the community of faith.

When Jesus was 12, he was close to becoming a Bar Mitzvah. However, the Bar Mitzvah ritual was not institutionalised until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There was no such ritual as such during the time of Jesus. But the basic ideas were already there. There is a time when a boy's status before God changes. It is this idea that we find in Luke's account of this visit to the temple by Jesus and His parents. He shows that there is a significant development in Jesus' understanding of Himself, His destiny and His mission.

## A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

Jerusalem is located in a hilly area and the approach to Jerusalem involves a climb. That is why the Bible always mentions going *up* to Jerusalem. The book of Psalms contains a group of songs that are collectively called the Songs of Ascent (Psalm 120–134). These were songs

that pilgrims sang as they went up to Jerusalem. As they saw the rising hills, they reflected on God, His character and His ways. “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1–2, ESV). “I rejoice with those who said to me, ‘Let us go the house of the Lord.’ Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:1–2). “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore” (Psalm 125:2).

The number of pilgrims in Jerusalem would increase significantly as people poured into the city. There would be throngs of people in the temple courts and much excitement and celebration. Perhaps friends and relatives who only met once a year would have an opportunity to joyfully catch up with one another. During the Passover celebrations, the pilgrims would sing the Passover songs (Psalm 113–118) which are together known as the Egyptian Hallel, songs of praise recalling God’s rescue of His people from Egypt following the original Passover (Exodus 12).

The Passover Feast would last a week after which the crowds in Jerusalem would thin out as people began their journey home. It was permitted to leave after the first three days, and some had to do so to tend to farms and trades they had left behind to make their pilgrimage.

## A MISSING SON

It was safer to travel together in caravans, and Mary and Joseph would have done so after the Feast was over (Luke 2:43). Some scholars have suggested that the women and children would have set off first as they tended to walk slower. The men would start walking later and because they walked faster, they would catch up with their families by evening to have the evening meal together with them.<sup>1</sup> If this was the case, then Mary would have been among the women in front and Joseph would have followed behind with the men.

When a boy grows up in a church where the men and women sit on different sides of the sanctuary (and they had churches like that many years ago, just like the one I attended as a child), the boy would normally sit with his mother when he was very young, and that was considered normal. Then comes the awkward age when the boy, having grown older, has to decide whether he still belonged to the women's side or whether he should join his father and sit with the men. Then one day, he migrates to the male side and feels comfortable sitting there. He has grown up.

Perhaps Mary thought that Jesus was now more comfortable walking with the men. "How things are

changing,” she must have thought. “Last year Jesus walked with me, but from now on He will be with the men.” She may have smiled to herself as she noted that her Son had grown up. On his part, Joseph may have thought that Jesus was walking with Mary, just as He did the previous year. He was so used to this that he did not think much of it. But as it turned out, Jesus was with neither of them. By the time Joseph caught up with Mary and they were ready to have their family meal, they found to their horror that their Son was missing. They called out His name as they went forward and backward along the caravan. They thought that Jesus may have been with some friends or relatives in the group. But nobody knew where Jesus was. He was nowhere to be found.

We can imagine the sinking feeling in Mary and Joseph’s hearts. Even if your child is missing for a minute—in a crowded shopping centre or a spacious and busy park, you know how it feels. Rising panic with thoughts of all kinds of things that could have happened to your child rush into your dread-filled mind. Where is my child? Who is with him? What is happening to him? These urgent questions would make your heart heavy with anxiety and worry.

Realising that Jesus was not with them, and that they had left their 12-year-old Son in crowded Jerusalem, the distraught parents decided to leave the caravan and rush



back to the city. They had already travelled a full day but now they had to retrace their steps to find their missing Son. It would have taken about three to five days to travel from Jerusalem to Nazareth. Joseph and Mary had already covered a third to a fifth of the journey. But now they had to start all over again. Worse, they were worried about Jesus. Would they find Him?

Did Joseph and Mary talk as they hurried back? Did they blame each other for what had happened? How could they do such a thing—leave behind their Son like that? Or, they could have prayed many times along the way, asking God to help them find their Son. When they reached Jerusalem, they searched all over the city for a whole day. They would have returned to all the places they had been, houses of acquaintances in the city, the market and other places of interest. Finally they found Him in the temple courts. They found Jesus three days after they set out for Nazareth—one day on the outward journey, another day on the hurried return journey and a whole day of frantic searching.

### AN ASTONISHING SIGHT

They saw their 12-year-old Son *sitting among the teachers* (Luke 2:46). The learned teachers of the Law were formidable-looking people. Their great learning separated them from ordinary folks who kept a respectful

distance from them. They probably did not bother with children and their childish ways. But here young Jesus was seated among them. What a sight! He seemed so comfortable among the teachers, neither overwhelmed nor intimidated by them.

Jesus was *listening to the teachers*. He obviously did not suffer from a short attention span or need to be entertained to help Him pay attention. As the teachers spoke, Jesus listened intently and His eyes and countenance showed He had no trouble understanding what they were saying. It is akin to a young boy attending a lecture on complex mathematics. Instead of dozing off or leaving to amuse himself in some other activity, the boy listens carefully to the lecture, following every argument and point with understanding and insight. That was how remarkable it was.

Jesus also *asked the teachers questions*. The kind of questions people ask reveals what the person knows or does not know. Ignorant people often ask silly, embarrassing or irrelevant questions. Not so Jesus. His questions were amazing for they demonstrated profound understanding of the Law and the Scriptures. The teachers may have wondered among themselves: Where does this boy come from? Who is his rabbi and mentor? They were amazed by His brilliance and depth. He seemed to have a knack for getting to the heart of the

matter, testing assumptions and showing consequences of taking a particular line of thought.

Jesus was not only asking questions, He *was also giving answers*, perhaps to the questions posed by the teachers and to His own questions (Luke 2:47). A crowd must have gathered around this group of teachers talking to a child sitting with them. They heard the conversation and they were deeply impressed. “Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:47). In the original Greek, the word for “amazed” is the first word of the sentence, showing that Luke wanted to emphasise that fact—that Jesus was simply amazing.

Joseph and Mary, as they were frantically looking for Jesus in the temple area, must have noticed a crowd of onlookers in the temple courtyard. They drew closer wondering what the crowd was watching. They saw the teachers seated and then they saw Jesus seated among them! Perhaps they did not interrupt the discussion out of reverence for the teachers. They were simply relieved to have found Jesus. As they took in the sight of their Son seated with the teachers and having a learned conversation with them, they were “astonished” (Luke 2:48). Then at an appropriate time, Mary spoke to Jesus.

## IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

Relief, pride and anger perhaps flowed into Mary's heart like three fast-moving streams converging into a turbulent and swollen river. She noted that Jesus did not look surprised or guilty when He saw her. He was calm and smiling. She asked Him, perhaps with a note of irritation and a little out of breath, never mind that the teachers and the crowd were overhearing: "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you" (Luke 2:48). Mary was letting off some steam, having looked for Jesus so frantically, having suffered as only a mother would in such circumstances.

Jesus replied her calmly. "Why were you searching for me?" He asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49). On the surface, this may have sounded like a rather harsh and unfilial response. But this was no spoilt child expressing a lack of sensitivity to what His parents had gone through. Perhaps Jesus may have told Mary earlier that He was going to the temple courts to speak to the teachers. Mary may not have paid attention or realised what He was saying. Thus Jesus seemed surprised that His parents were searching for Him. They should have known that He would be in the temple.

More importantly, Jesus responded to Mary's reference to Joseph as "Your father". He now refers to God as His Father; thus the temple was His Father's house. That is where He belonged. In several ways, Jesus was home in the temple. In saying this, Jesus was not insulting Joseph or acting in an ungrateful way towards Joseph, but Jesus was simply declaring His own self-understanding. Joseph was His foster father who had taken good care of Him and Mary, but it was time for Jesus to turn His attention to His heavenly Father for this Father had sent Him with a particular mission which He had to fulfil at the right time.

Joseph does not say a word, at least according to the Scriptures. Remember, he was the strong, silent type. It was Mary who spoke up on his behalf. Would Joseph have said something? We don't know for the Bible is silent about it. Whatever the case might have been, the parents "did not understand what he was saying to them" (Luke 2:50). It was too deep for them. Yes, they had heard the angels talking to them about their special Son. They had witnessed the visit of the Magi and saw how God protected this child. They had seen Him grow up to be godly and wise. But what He said about His Father's house was something they found difficult to understand. The idea of anyone calling God his own Father was rather odd, and even blasphemous in the ears

of many Jews, as Jesus would find out later (John 8:49–59; Matthew 26:63–66).

Mary and Joseph were pious Jews who feared God and were trained to believe in strict monotheism. The God of Israel is one. For Him to have a son was a strange idea, not that the Old Testament was totally silent regarding the fact that God is our Father. God told Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Israel is my firstborn son” (Exodus 4:22). Jesus is the true Israel and Jew and the true Son of God. More importantly He was God too. All this was not easy to understand and we cannot fault Mary and Joseph for failing to grasp the truth of the triune God.

Instead of understanding what Jesus had just said, Mary, as a concerned mother, was more worried about the welfare of her Son. It had been three days. What had Jesus eaten? Did anyone give Him any food and water? He must have been hungry; she may have opened up her food package and offered Him some bread. Such are mothers; they readily think of such things as they care for their children.

## JESUS WAS OBEDIENT TO HIS PARENTS

His parents did not understand what He said, but that did not excuse Jesus from respecting and obeying His parents in accordance to the Law (Exodus 20:12;

Ephesians 6:1–2; Colossians 3:20). If how much we obey our parents depended on how much they understood us, then with growing knowledge from generation to generation, each generation would not obey the previous generation. Unfortunately we are seeing signs of this. One of the characteristics of the “terrible times in the last days” that Paul describes is children who are “disobedient to their parents” (2 Timothy 3:2).

It is remarkable that though His parents lacked understanding, nevertheless Jesus “went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them” (Luke 2:51). God has established an order for society and family relationships, and as far as parents and children are concerned, children must respect and obey their parents. Even though He was the Son of God and knew more than His parents did, Jesus observed God’s Law and order and remained obedient to them. He had grown in His identity and sense of mission, He had just gone through a Bar Mitzvah experience, for He was now moving on to another stage in His life. He was now a man with responsibilities. Yet, He was obedient to His parents.

Jesus is not only our Saviour and Lord, He is also our Model. He shows us how to live, how to love God and others, and how to become like Him. As we observe Him and seek to emulate Him by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can become like Him more and more.

## MARY'S TREASURE

As they returned to Nazareth, perhaps the caravan waited for them and they were able to join it. Or, perhaps it was just the family that made their way back. What did they talk about? There must have been significant periods of silence as each person quietly reflected on the recent visit to Jerusalem. Jesus would have remembered His discussion with the religious teachers and thought about His growing identity as God's Son. Joseph may have nursed the hurt of having his Son emphasise that His Father is from heaven, and then remember the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. He would have thought about what it meant to hand his adopted son back to His real Father.

Mary would have reflected on what she saw and heard, how she panicked when Jesus went missing, the pain of losing Him, and how she felt pride rise in her heart seeing her Son holding an engaging conversation with the most learned men of Israel. She thought about what Jesus had said about being in His Father's house. She too would have remembered the angels and the extraordinary messages and events surrounding the birth of Jesus. She knew that He was special, the Messiah, and He seemed to say that He was someone greater.

Mary "treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51). She was pretty good at doing this (Luke 2:19),



recollecting special events and insights, and storing them up in her heart's memory and in the depths of her soul. These were treasures, and she collected them faithfully and gratefully. They would make her heart rich with divine presence and grace, and bless her greatly.

Years later, Mary would have remembered what she saw in the temple courts—her young son, the child prodigy, holding court with the learned and respected teachers of the Law. In that same temple court, she would see her son, years later, speaking bravely about temple abuses and the stiff-necked faithlessness of religious leaders and their followers. He would overturn the tables of those who had turned the temple into a profitable marketplace, angrily asking them: “How dare you turn my Father’s house into a marketplace” (John 2:16). He would declare that these greedy and ungodly people had turned the temple into a den of robbers, instead of recognising that God intended His temple as a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17).

It was in the vicinity of that same temple complex that she saw her Son condemned as a blasphemer by wicked men and made to carry a cross to a hill where He was crucified. Mary suffered much but she also saw much of God’s grace. Her heart’s treasures were safely kept and taken out often in reflective wonder as she marvelled at God’s strange but loving ways. She knew that she had to let her Son go to do His larger

and eternal work, and as a mother it must have hurt to let go of her first-born. But she knew she had to, in obedience to God.

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is the passage on the temple visit a coming-of-age story? Why was this a turning point in the life of Jesus?
  2. Imagine what it would be like to lose your child for a few days? What would Mary and Joseph have said to each other? How would they have prayed? Did they lose their sleep and appetite? How would they have felt when they saw Jesus in the temple having a discussion with the religious teachers?
  3. What lessons does this story teach? What do you think of Jesus' self-understanding and His obedience to His parents? How difficult would it have been for the parents to learn to release their Son to the heavenly Father and His mission? How would you apply these lessons in your own family?
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## At a Wedding

Apart from the temple visit when he was 12, Scripture is silent about the days of Jesus as a child, youth and young adult. The next scene after the temple visit is a fast-forward jump of about 18 years to the beginning of His public ministry. Because of this biblical silence, we also do not know much about the family of Jesus. No information is given about Mary and Joseph or about the siblings of Jesus. We have already seen that the Gospel writers focused on the mission of Jesus, the reason why the Father had sent Him. Most space is given for this—the public ministry of Jesus which He did for more than three and a half years, from the age of about 30. Even in this account, the emphasis is on the events leading immediately to the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Mark and John in fact skip the infancy narratives and the rare childhood story of the temple visit. Instead they begin with the public ministry of Jesus and a brief introduction to John the Baptist who prepared the way

of the Lord. But John includes a story that is exclusive to his Gospel. It is a story of Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana. John's focus in the second half of the Gospel was the last week of Jesus' ministry. A third of the book's verses are dedicated to the last 24 hours of the earthly life of Jesus. Just as the second half focuses on the final days of Jesus, the first half of the book (chapters 1–11) deals with the identity of Jesus. John achieves this by listing seven miracles that act as signs, pointing to the identity and mission of Jesus. In the Bible, the number seven is a number of completeness. John provides full evidence that Jesus is the Son of God sent to save the world.

The first of these miracles took place at the wedding in Cana.

### AN EXTRAORDINARY GUEST AT AN ORDINARY WEDDING

After calling His first disciples—Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael, Jesus went to a wedding. Jesus and His disciples had been invited to the wedding (John 2:1). It was probably the wedding of a relative of Jesus. Hence we find Mary playing a key role; she seemed to be in charge of the proceedings. The brothers of Jesus were also at the wedding (John 2:12). It was very likely a wedding of someone in their extended family.

Joseph was conspicuously missing. In the infancy narratives and also in the story of the temple visit, Joseph always accompanied Mary, but this time her constant companion was missing. What had happened to him? Was he already dead, or is the Gospel writer easing him out of the narrative, now that the focus is shifting to Jesus as the Son of God? Most likely, as most scholars believe, Mary was a widow now. Her husband was gone, but she still had her firstborn and her other children.

That Jesus was the VIP at the wedding becomes clear when the miracle is described, and the result that “He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him” (John 2:11) is stated. This was the “first of his miraculous signs”.

## WHEN THE WINE RAN OUT

A Jewish wedding can be an elaborate affair. Even simple poor folk ensured that everything was done properly. Cana was very near Nazareth, about 10 km away. The wedding couple lived in Cana but they must have had friends and relatives living in surrounding villages and towns whom they had invited to the celebrations. Jewish weddings are celebratory events, and in rabbinic teaching, wine at the wedding represents joy in the marriage. This wine also contributes directly to the joy and celebration. It was therefore important that there was enough wine

for the guests. To run out of wine would not be a good thing; at best, it would be considered a most unfortunate turn of events and for the more superstitious, a bad and disturbing omen. Also, such a mistake would not be easily forgotten in a close-knit community of friends and relatives. It is one of the nightmares that wedding couples have.

The family may have been poor and could not afford to have large amounts of wine, hoping that what they had would be enough for the guests. Perhaps the immediate family members restricted the amount they drank as they saw that the wine level was running low.

Then it happened—there was no more wine. There were some anxious whispers among those in charge of the wine. Because Mary played a leading role in the wedding arrangements, she came to know about the embarrassing situation. She knew somehow that this was the kind of problem that her Son Jesus would be able to solve. He may have been talking about His messianic mission, or she sensed that He was launching out to public ministry. Why else would He have chosen His own disciples?

### A MOTHER'S REQUEST

Mary approached her Son Jesus and told Him, “They have no more wine” (John 2:3). She reported the problem to Him but did not tell Him what to do. But in the way

she told Him, she was expecting Him to do something about it. She may not have had any idea what He would do, but she was confident that He would do something. She expected a miracle—and what a wonderful thing it would be. Mary's Son would perform a miracle.

Jesus replied Mary in words that sounded rather curt: "Dear woman, why do you involve me? ... My time has not yet come" (John 2:4). Why did Jesus not address Mary as "Mother"? Why did He call her "Dear woman"? In Greek, this was a term of respect, something like "Dear lady". Was Jesus telling Mary that there had been a change in their relationship? In fact nowhere in the Bible is Jesus said to have called Mary "Mother". This may simply be because there is so little in the Bible on the childhood and youthful years of Jesus, during which period he would have addressed her naturally as "mother". But now at Cana, Jesus calls Mary "woman" and for Mary this may have signalled to her that her Son was moving on to do the work of His heavenly Father. She would no longer tell Him what to do and had to learn how to let Him go.

When Jesus said that His time had not come, He may have been thinking of His larger mission, and especially of the sacrifice of Himself on the cross. Later, when His brothers asked Him to go to Jerusalem to attend the Feast of the Tabernacles, Jesus replied, "The right time for me has not yet come" (John 7:1-9). The brothers suggested

that with Jerusalem crowded for the Feast, it was a great opportunity for Him to “show yourself to the world” by doing some miracles. John adds that even the Lord’s brothers did not believe in Him. Subsequently as His crucifixion was imminent, Jesus declared that the hour had come (John 12:23, 27). In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you” (John 17:1).

Therefore, when Jesus told Mary that His time had not yet come, it was not a refusal to grant the request of Mary. He was simply stating that the cross still lay ahead of Him. He then went on to perform His miracle as Mary requested. Knowing her son well, Mary knew that Jesus would do whatever was appropriate; she trusted Him. She told the servants at the wedding celebrations, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). She left the matter to Jesus and instructed the servants accordingly.

## THE MIRACLE

Jesus saw six stone water jars standing nearby. There was plenty of water in them for the purpose of ceremonial washing according to Jewish custom. The Jews were expected to give their hands a ceremonial washing before they ate (cf. Mark 7:1–4). This was more than washing for cleanliness sake; it was for ritual purity that these stipulations were created. When Jesus’ disciples did



not follow these ceremonial rules on another occasion, some Pharisees and teachers of the Law complained to Jesus who dismissed their complaints by calling their ceremonial rules as belonging to mere “traditions of men” as compared to the real “commands of God” (Mark 7:8).

So there were six jars containing some water for ceremonial washing. Jesus instructed the servants to fill all the jars with water, and they had no problem filling the jars to the brim. Even though the wine had run out, water was in plentiful supply. Jesus then told the servants to draw out some water and take it to the master of the banquet. They must have been puzzled. Why bring water meant for ceremonial washing to the master of the banquet to taste? But it is likely that when they scooped out the water, they saw that it had been turned to wine. Daring not to taste it themselves, their hearts must have been pounding at having witnessed a stunning miracle, and so they brought the wine for the master to taste. They paused as he tasted the water that was turned into wine. His face showed that the wine was good. Then he gave a puzzled look.

He called the groom and told him, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now” (John 2:10). The groom must have been puzzled himself, not being able to answer the master who wondered at the groom’s catering strategy.

Neither the groom nor the master knew how the wine had come about. The servants knew and looked at each other with a knowing smile. Mary's Son had done something unexpected and astounding. The Scripture does not tell us whether these servants told the wedding guests what happened. Perhaps they did and that is how the disciples knew about it and came to put their faith in Jesus (John 2:11). Or, the disciples may have witnessed the servants pouring water into the jars and then bringing out the choicest wine from the jars. Then the miracle would have been a little secret known only to the servants and disciples, and Mary and Jesus. Mary may have looked at Jesus with a smile that said at once: "How marvellous, my son!" and "Thank you!"

## THE MIRACLE WAS A SIGN

John tells us that this was the first of Jesus' miraculous signs. Each of the seven miracles that John includes in his Gospel is a sign. A sign signifies something and we ask: What did this miracle signify? The six jars were for ceremonial washing and represent the old covenant (what God had commanded the Jews through the Law and what the religious leaders had added on to them with their traditions). Jesus turned this water of the old covenant to the wine of the new covenant. At the last supper, Jesus took the cup of wine and told His disciples,

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). Jesus was bringing in a new reality that He achieved through the cross. His first miracle at Cana pointed to it. Jesus was transforming human religiosity that does not match God’s standards or give true satisfaction to true spirituality made possible by divine grace and mercy. As Bruce Milne reminds us, “this miracle can happen again as the water of guilt, habitual failure and legalism, is transformed by the word of the risen Jesus into the wine of forgiveness, victory and joyful obedience.”<sup>1</sup>

It was superior wine, the best. And there was lots of it. 180 gallons (almost 700 litres) of wine was more than enough for all the guests at the wedding. When God gives, He gives with such magnificent generosity. And that is the truth of the Gospel. When God gave His Son we received an indescribable gift (2 Corinthians 9:15). He did not send one of His angels or even an archangel; He sent His only begotten Son.

## AFTER THE WEDDING

When the wedding celebration ended, John gives an interesting piece of information. Jesus moves to Capernaum which was to become His headquarters in His Galilean ministry (Matthew 4:13). Naturally His disciples accompanied Him. What is noteworthy

is that Mary and her other sons also followed Jesus to Capernaum (John 2:12). All of them stayed there for a few days. Did they visit a relative? Or, a family friend? Were they curious about what Jesus was up to? What sort of ministry was He starting?

Imagine the conversations before they left for Capernaum, and also on the way there. What questions did they ask and how did Jesus answer them? We do not have the details and we can only speculate. During His ministry, Jesus moved out of Nazareth and lived mainly in Capernaum. From there he ministered to the surrounding towns and villages in Galilee and also travelled to Jerusalem and other places. Capernaum was also the home of Peter (Matthew 8:14), who would have made sure that Jesus and His family were well taken care of during this visit.

From Capernaum, Jesus travelled to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. We are not sure if the whole group went with Him, including Mary, the brothers of Jesus, and His disciples. Perhaps that is why they went down from Cana to Capernaum, in order to travel further down to Jerusalem. If that was the case, they would have witnessed Jesus overturning the tables at the temple and reprimanding the moneychangers and merchants who had turned the temple courts into a market. Mary would have heard Jesus referring again to the temple as His

Father's house. She would have realised that though the hour had not yet come, it was not very far away.

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### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think the miracle in Cana signifies? What does it say about Jesus and His mission?
  2. If you were one of the servants who were eye-witnesses of the miracle, how would you have responded? How would it have changed your life? How would you have told the story to your friends and relatives? Have you witnessed any miracles of God? What was your response to them?
  3. What would have been Mary's response to the miracle? What about the brothers of Jesus? How would they have talked about it on the way to Capernaum? The disciples put their faith in Jesus. How does one put his faith in Jesus?
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## At the Cross

The Lord Jesus was arrested by a crowd of enemies—including a detachment of soldiers, together with some officials sent by the chief priests and Pharisees (John 18:3). He was betrayed by one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, who for his own reasons was guilty of a dastardly act, betraying his master with whom he had travelled and eaten. Jesus knew that Judas' heart was not right with Him and that he would prove to be treacherously disloyal (Matthew 26:20–25). With the kiss of familiar greeting which was meant to point out Jesus to His arresters, Judas etched his name permanently as one of the most notorious men to meet Jesus.

### THE FLIGHT OF THE DISCIPLES

Peter, possibly thinking that Jesus would exercise power and authority to fight off His enemies, drew his sword

and with unexpected martial skill, cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant (John 18:10–11). Being the high priest's employee, Malchus could have been particularly rude and obnoxious, prominent in the crowd that turned up in the Garden of Gethsemane. He would have exhibited the hatred of his master who was one of Jesus' chief enemies. We can imagine why Peter chose to injure this man; it was an attack against him as well as his priestly master.

However, Jesus did not congratulate Peter or condone his action. He commanded Peter to put away his sword. He revealed that He was able to have 12 legions of angels sent by His Father to fight His enemies (Matthew 26:53). In numerical terms, that would be about 60,000 angels—a formidable force indeed. The term “twelve legions” could also signify a full force of angels because of the full number of 12. But Jesus set aside such display of power to protect Himself because He had come to sacrifice Himself for the sins of men and women.

Jesus then healed Malchus (Luke 22:51). We do not know what happened to this man, but surely he was deeply touched by the Lord and would not be the same again. Could he have become a member of the early church?

When faced with the realisation that Jesus was not going to resist His arrest, His disciples lost courage, and



fled the scene. “Then everyone deserted him and fled” (Mark 14:50), even Peter, who had boasted that even if the others would flee, Jesus could rely on him; he would stick with Jesus to the end (Matthew 26:31–33). Peter had enough courage (or rather curiosity) to follow the arrested Jesus from a safe distance. And as Jesus had predicted, Peter shamefully denied any association with the Lord when challenged—not once but three times (Matthew 26:69–75).

The men who followed Jesus were such a disappointment. One was a traitor, another tried to save his own skin, and the others did the same. The only disciple who had any gumption to show his love for Jesus was John. He was there near the cross.

## THE WOMEN AT THE CROSS

The disciples were living examples of how men often handle helplessness. When Jesus was arrested, Peter turned to the sword and his prowess in using it. Toys and techniques are what men turn to when there is trouble. But when these are denied or do not work, then men feel helpless, and in that state, they tend to run away. Men are not too good at handling powerlessness and vulnerability.

Women seem to be better at handling helplessness. Historically, women have been suffering from disadvan-

tagged positions, with power taken away from them. They have a collective experience from which they can draw strength when faced with danger and defencelessness. This is what we discover at Calvary. The group of men who followed Jesus were not there when Jesus was crucified. Only John, the beloved disciple, was there. But many of the women followers were there.

John tells us in his Gospel (John 19:25) that near the cross were Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary, the wife of Clopas, Mary's sister—presumably Salome, the mother of James and John, Jesus' disciples (cf. Matthew 27:56; Mark 10:35; 15:40), and Mary Magdalene.<sup>1</sup>

## MARY AT THE CROSS

No mother would be able to bear seeing her son become the object of collective hatred, being beaten up to a pulp and crucified on the cross. What could Mary do? She helplessly watched Jesus walk down the path of suffering and humiliation, carrying the cross to His execution. She who would have fussed over a bruised knee when Jesus fell as a child, or a cut in the finger when He was working in His workshop, now watched Him fall, His face swollen with beating and His body bleeding from torn flesh, with blood running freely down His weakened and dehydrated body. She was unable to give him a cup of water or nurse His ghastly wounds, though

the mother in her cried and longed to lovingly wipe His blood-stained face and gently nurse His broken body.

Knowing the details of Roman crucifixion would make us appreciate even more what Mary endured seeing her suffering Son and Saviour. Crucifixion was designed as a brutal and humiliating form of punishment that would strike deep fear in the hardest of criminals or insurgents. It was meant to torture as well as act as an effective deterrent. Hence maximum pain was inflicted. The condemned person was beaten severely to take half the life out of him. Then he was crucified with nails driven into each hand and with both feet together. Besides the excruciating pain, the crucified man would struggle to breathe. The only way he could breathe was to rest his feet on a small wooden piece to which his feet were nailed. With severe pain he would be unable to maintain this for any length of time. He would then hang on his wrists secured by nails. That in and of itself would be hugely painful. Hanging on his wrists would be severely restrictive as he gasped for breath.

Shifting between his feet and wrists, from one excruciating pain to another, the man would finally die of asphyxiation as he gave in to pain and weakness and bled away to death.. Seeing a crucified person tortured beyond imagination was itself a horrific experience. But seeing your own beloved son tortured publicly on the cross is the cruellest experience any mother can have.

Mary loved Jesus and had treasured many poignant memories of their life together. He was such a fine son who brought joy to her heart, and she could not find a single moment in His behaviour and relationship with her that brought her pain. But now a huge stake was driven into her heart to see Him hanging like a hated criminal.

The Romans stripped a condemned person of everything so that any remaining semblance of human dignity was harshly taken away from him. The crucified person would be stripped of all clothing to hang naked in public humiliation. To be publicly executed and to die in such a way in full view of others, enemies, friends, and curious onlookers included, is something that no person would choose. But the crucified men were forced to accept this; they were powerless and compelled to be in full public view. To see her son humiliated and to be helpless to do anything about it would be unimaginably agonising for a mother. Mary would have longed to find a cloak to cover up her Son's forced nakedness and to nurse His bleeding wounds. The words of the old prophet at the temple had come true—her soul was repeatedly pierced by a cruel sword as she saw her Son hanging on a cross.

The suffering of Jesus on the cross was extremely painful and tragic. Max Lucado offers a graphic portrayal of how Jesus died:

... whip-ripped muscles drape His back. Blood rivulets over His face. His eyes and lips are swollen shut. Handfuls of beard have been yanked out. Pain rages at wildfire heat. As He sinks to relieve the agony of His legs, His airway closes at the edge of suffocation. He shoves pierced muscles against the spike and inches up the cross. He does this for hours. Painfully up and down, until His strength and our doubts are gone.<sup>2</sup>

### THIS IS YOUR SON

Even as Jesus was fighting for His breath on the cross and was weakening rapidly, unable even to wipe the rivulets of blood flowing down His face, He noticed His mother standing there. “When Jesus saw his mother there... ” (John 19:26), He must have looked at her sadly, pained at seeing her there. He felt her pain, and it added to all His sufferings on the cross. He remembered her mother’s love—the occasions when He particularly received her many expressions of maternal love, fussing over Him when He was a boy, silently watching Him to make sure that He had sufficient food to eat and enough rest, looking at Him with a mother’s pride and joy. Now she stood there with a deeply broken heart and a tear-filled face.

He thought about her future needs. Who would take care of her? Even in His dying moments, Jesus had time and selfless love to think of others. His mother was particularly important to Him. With gratitude and concern for her, He looked at her from the cross. He then noticed “the disciple whom he loved” standing there—which is John’s way of referring to himself. Jesus then said to Mary, “Dear woman, here is your son” and to John, He said “Here is your mother” (John 19:26–27). Unable to come down from the cross or use His loving hands, just with His words, Jesus brought John’s hand and Mary’s hand together into a new mother-son relationship. He handed the responsibility of a son to John and ensured that Mary would be taken care of for the rest of her life.

Jesus had other brothers who could have naturally taken care of Mary. He need not have taken the effort to ask John to take care of her. But in so doing He showed special concern for His mother and did not want to leave her future welfare to natural familial relationships. For Mary, John would have become a special son, someone handpicked by her beloved Son. “From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (John 19:27).

Mary saw her Son die. Her tears would have dried up by then. All four Gospels mention Joseph of Arimathea as the man who went to Pilate to get permission to claim the body of Christ so that He could receive a proper

burial. Joseph, the namesake of Joseph of Nazareth, did what a close family member would do—with the help of Nicodemus, the Pharisee who visited Jesus by night, he brought down the body from the cross, wrapped it with linen and buried it in a new tomb (Luke 23:53).

Popular piety over the centuries has envisioned scenes of Mary mourning over the body of her Son, though Scripture is silent about it and has left it to our imagination. *Pieta*, the famous sculpture by Michelangelo in the fifteenth century, and now placed in St Peter's in the Vatican, provides a visual heart-wrenching scene that enables some understanding of the maternal distress and pathos that Mary suffered.

## MARY AFTER THE CROSS

The Bible does not say much about what happened to Mary after the scene at the cross. She is mentioned as part of the group of disciples who gathered regularly in prayer after the resurrection, appearance and ascension of Jesus Christ. The apostles were there, together with the women—they gathered with “Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14). Clearly, Mary must have provided encouragement and support to the disciples. Her special position as the mother of Jesus and her close knowledge of Him would have earned her the special respect of the disciples and followers of Jesus.

She would have provided additional information and insights to the early Christians. For example, how else would Luke know that Mary, after witnessing special events in the life of Jesus, “treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19, 51).

After the mention of Mary in Acts 2, we do not hear further about Mary in the Bible, except for a highly symbolic description of the birth of Christ in Revelation 12:1–6. But there are many traditions about Mary. There is one that says that Mary accompanied the disciple John, who kept the command of the crucified Christ, to Ephesus where John was the church leader. Church Fathers such as Irenaeus and Eusebius mention that John, Jesus’ disciple, went to Ephesus and became a leader in the church there. If that was so, then Mary would have accompanied John since Jesus had entrusted Mary to the care and protection of John.

In the nineteenth century, Anne Catherine Emmerich, a bedridden German Augustinian nun, had several visions including a house in which Mary was believed to have lived in near Ephesus. A house was found in the countryside near Ephesus in Turkey that is said to fit Emmerich’s description and now has become a shrine visited by Roman Catholics, Muslims and others. It has been visited by several popes.

The veneration of Mary developed over the years, and various doctrines were formulated to keep up with the



growing elevation of Mary to divine proportions. What began as the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary (that Mary never had other children) later grew into ideas of her immaculate conception (that, like Jesus, she was free from original sin)<sup>3</sup> and her assumption into heaven (since she is claimed to be sinless, she did not die). In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, Mary has a highly elevated position, and attitudes towards her vary from folk worship of her to ideas of hyper-veneration that fall short of worship. Praying to her as a special mediator is common.

The Reformers in the sixteenth century, while accepting some aspects of the high view of Mary held historically by the church, nevertheless rejected much of the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary and popular Marian devotion. Martin Luther accepted that Mary should be respected (the way we should respect one another) but not venerated excessively as was the case in his days. He wrote: “We also grant that she should be honored, since we, according to Saint Paul’s words [Romans 12] are indebted to show honor one to another for the sake of the One who dwells in us, Jesus Christ. Therefore we have an obligation to honor Mary. But be careful to give her honor that is fitting. Unfortunately, I worry that we give her all too high an honor for she is accorded much more esteem than she should be given or than she accounted to herself.”<sup>4</sup>

Reflecting Protestant objections to excessive Marian devotion, Karl Barth wrote in his monumental *Church Dogmatics* that “Where ever Mary is venerated, and devotion to her takes place, there the Church of Christ does not exist... The heresy of the Catholic Church is its mariology and Marian cult.”<sup>5</sup> The Protestants, however, accepted the title of *theotokos* given to Mary. Barth explained that through Mary, Jesus became a man and through Jesus, she became the “Mother of God”. She was given the title more because of who Jesus is rather than who she is. Protestants accepted what the Bible says about Mary—that she was highly favoured by God, a humble and obedient servant of the Lord, and the mother of Jesus.

In the second century, Origen coined the term *theotokos* in reference to Mary. The term means “God bearer” or more popularly “Mother of God”. In the subsequent centuries, fierce debates raged in the church about this term.<sup>6</sup> There were those who, in emphasising the divinity of Jesus, saw in the term a way of carrying that emphasis. Others challenged the use of this term asking how a human being could be the mother of God. Eventually *theotokos* came into orthodox use for doctrinal reasons—to emphasise the divinity of Christ. The term had to do with who Jesus is rather than who Mary is.

However, in subsequent popular devotion, the term came to be used with the emphasis on Mary.<sup>7</sup> In the Hail Mary Prayer used frequently in Roman Catholic devotion, Mary is referred to as “Mother of God”, resulting in the elevation of Mary rather than the original elevation of Christ. If Mary were to say something today, she would be disturbed by the way she has been elevated to the same level as Jesus. She would continue to say, “I am the Lord’s servant” (Luke 1:38), grateful for the privilege given to her by God’s grace, and yet humbly bowing her knees and declaring Jesus to be her Lord.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. If Mary was praying to God when she saw her Son being crucified, how do you think she would have prayed? Have you helplessly watched a loved one suffer? What was your response?
  2. Reflect on the women gathered at the cross. How would Mary have gained comfort from their presence? Do you think Jesus would have been comforted by their helpless presence? Why did the male disciples run away? Think of how you would relate with a dying person.
  3. What do you think of the term *theotokos* given to Mary? Reflect on the elevation of Mary—whether it is acceptable, and why or why not? If Mary was around today, what would she say about Jesus and how we should respond to Him (and to her)?
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# The Siblings of Jesus

The popular picture of the Holy Family comprising only three persons—Mary, Joseph and Jesus—is only partially correct. In reality there were other children in the family. Not much is known about these siblings of Jesus, but we do have enough reference in Scripture to be able to sketch something out of it.

## WHO WERE THESE SIBLINGS?

There exists a fair degree of confusion and dispute about the siblings of Jesus. This is partly due to the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity that emerged among some early Christian leaders asserting that Jesus was her only child and she gave birth to no other. If that was true, then who were the siblings of Jesus? Some have suggested that they were the children of Joseph from his first wife. Others have suggested that they were children of a sister of Mary, who is believed to be the wife of Clopas

mentioned in the Bible. If so the siblings of Jesus would have been His cousins. However, Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington helpfully point out that in Greek there were distinct words for brothers (*adelphoi*) and cousins (*anepsioi*), and *anepsioi* is never used in the Bible to denote the brothers of Jesus. In fact, the second century Christian writer Hegesippus had identified the cousins of Jesus separately from His brothers.<sup>1</sup>

Mark and Matthew give us the names of the brothers of Jesus: James, Joseph, Judas and Simon (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55). Jesus also had sisters but they were not named. These siblings were the natural children of Mary and Joseph (cf. Matthew 1:25) and they grew up in the same home in which Jesus lived. They would have known Jesus the way siblings know one another. Shared meals, whispered secrets, robust childhood games, Sabbath rituals, family fun and humour. Jesus was like them in many things but they would have noticed that He was also different. He never told lies or stole olives from the jar in the kitchen. He never fought with the boys or punched them in a boistrous melee, so common among boys. He was generous to a fault, always waiting till others had taken their share of the food, or sharing His bread with other children who did not have enough food to eat. In these things, Jesus was frighteningly different. They often wondered why He was like that.

## JESUS AND HIS SIBLINGS

The siblings of Jesus would have accompanied their parents to Jerusalem every year, though there is only one account of this, and the siblings are not mentioned in that account; only Jesus is highlighted. Luke may have left out the siblings to keep the focus on Jesus and His mission connected to His heavenly Father. If some of the siblings were there with Joseph and Mary, they would have been quite young and would not have appreciated all the fuss and frantic searching.

The brothers of Jesus are kept in the shadows by the Gospel writers. In John's account of the wedding in Cana, it is evident that they were also guests at the wedding. This is indicated at the end of the story, when it is mentioned that Jesus "went down to Capernaum with his mother *and brothers* and his disciples" (John 2:12). But nothing more is said about the brothers. They seem to be marginal figures.

It is possible that some, if not all of Jesus' brothers were carpenters like Joseph and Jesus, but we cannot be sure of this; in Mark 6:3, the verse that mentions the brothers of Jesus by name, only Jesus is referred to as "the carpenter". But Scripture portrays them as initially having difficulty believing in Jesus.

Near the end of His public ministry, Jesus ministered all around Galilee and deliberately stayed away from Judea where His fellow-Jews were waiting to kill Him (John 7:1–10). But as the Feast of the Tabernacles was approaching, and Jews were expected to congregate in Jerusalem, the brothers of Jesus urged Him to make the trip to Jerusalem. The brothers advised Jesus: “You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.”

It is not clear whether the brothers of Jesus appreciated the danger that Jesus was in. They were probably not aware of it; if they were, they did not seem to care very much about the safety of their eldest brother. What is clear is that they did not think much about the claims of Jesus or what He taught. “For even his own brothers did not believe in him” (John 7:5). How sad this must have been for Jesus; He knows how it feels when your family members do not believe in God or what you are doing.

Jesus told His unbelieving and sceptical brothers that His time had not yet come and told them to go ahead on their own to Jerusalem. But after they had gone, Jesus also set out to Jerusalem “not publicly, but in secret” (John 7:10). It was better to travel alone or in a company of devoted disciples than to journey



with sceptical brothers whose attitude would dampen one's spirit.

When Jesus' ministry peaked with crowds following Him in many places, He was so busy meeting the needs of the people that He and His disciples did not even have time to eat a decent meal (Mark 3:20). The news reached the ears of Jesus' family and they were concerned. "When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). Mary and her other sons arrived where Jesus was, and because they were not able to get through the thick crowd to Jesus, they sent word that "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you" (Mark 3:33).

We cannot imagine, after all that has been said in Scripture about her relationship with Jesus, that Mary would have thought that Jesus was out of His mind. She was probably concerned about the welfare of Jesus, that He needed to eat proper meals. Which mother would not think of such things for her children, even when they are grown up? The sentiment that Jesus was out of His mind probably came from His brothers. They did not believe in Jesus and therefore saw things only from a human or worldly perspective. They may have persuaded their concerned mother to travel with them to find Jesus and knock some sense into their brother and to persuade Him to scale down His wandering ministry.

On another occasion, Jesus visited Nazareth and found the people there as hard as a rock, impervious to the workings of God. They mentioned the fact that they knew Jesus and His family well; they were ordinary folks. How could one of them be the Messiah? They dismissed the notion and “took offence at him” (Mark 6:3). Recognising their hardness of heart and lack of faith, Jesus observed, “Only in his hometown among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor” (Mark 6:4). Jesus was saddened by the lack of faith not only among His own townspeople but also among His own relatives and brothers.

As far as Jesus’ brothers were concerned, it was a case of “familiarity breeds contempt”. They did not seem to find it easy to believe in Jesus. Their familiarity with Jesus blinded their eyes to the truth about Him. They are not mentioned in the various crucifixion accounts. Mary was there, but His brothers were missing. That may be why Jesus had to hand Mary over to His disciple John to be cared for. Mary’s husband Joseph had most likely passed on, and whether the other sons would take care of their mother was not certain.

Until the crucifixion of Jesus, it appears that His brothers did not believe in Him. But the knowledge that their beloved but hauntingly strange brother had been crucified must have softened their hearts. Then some, if not all of them saw the risen Christ, and their opinion

about Jesus changed dramatically. Paul mentions that the resurrected Jesus appeared to many, including His brother James (1 Corinthians 15:7).

## JAMES

James, one of the brothers of Jesus, became a respected leader of the church in Jerusalem. He also came to be known as James the Just. Presumably his relationship with Jesus was an important factor in his rise in leadership, but it must also have been his faith and character. After James, leadership in the church did not deliberately pass down familial lines and there was no “dynasty of Jesus”. Instead leadership passed on to many godly men and women who followed Christ with sincerity and devotion.

In the early days, one of Jesus’ disciples, James (not to be confused with James the brother of Jesus), was executed by Herod Agrippa I and Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12). Peter had an astounding experience when God miraculously released him from prison. When Peter returned to the believers, he instructed them to “Tell James and the brothers about this” (Acts 12:17). It is to be noted that James was already considered to be a leader in the church. This was not the result of instructions left by Jesus as asserted, for example, by the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* which claims that Jesus told His disciples that His brother James would succeed

Him. This is an unreliable piece of information; it is likely that James became the leader of the Jerusalem church by the decision of the apostles and early Christians because of His character and leadership qualities and as guided by the Holy Spirit, not because of any specific succession plan. With the apostles spreading out from Jerusalem in mission, it was quite natural for James who did not seem to have travelled outside Jerusalem to assume leadership in the Jerusalem church.

When a council of apostles and elders in Jerusalem was convened to deal with a key doctrinal and missiological issue (whether Gentile Christians were required to follow Jewish ceremonial laws), the leadership role of James was clear. At the meeting, Peter, Paul and Barnabas were there. They all contributed significantly to the discussion. There were also others from the “party of the Pharisees” who insisted that Gentile Christians must be circumcised as required in the Mosaic Law. When all had spoken, it was James who gave the concluding statement (Acts 15:13).

James, being the presiding leader, referred to Scripture and concluded that the church should not require circumcision of Gentile Christians. “It is *my judgment*,” he declared, “that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). James spoke with the authority of a leader and his judgment was respectfully accepted by all present.

This same James wrote his epistle which is found in the New Testament. Though he was a brother of Jesus, he does not mention it—out of humility and respect for Jesus. He also did not want to distract his readers from realising the true identity of Jesus. Therefore, he begins his epistle with the words; “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). He addresses Jesus as “Lord” and considers himself as the Lord’s servant. What a remarkable change in a man whose familiarity with Jesus had blinded him once from realising the true identity of Jesus!

James must have been particularly appreciative of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount because his epistle remarkably echoes many parts of the sermon. For example, we may note the following connections between Matthew’s account of the sermon (M) and James’ epistle (J):

| J    | M       |
|------|---------|
| 1:2  | 5:11–12 |
| 1:4  | 5:48    |
| 1:5  | 7:7     |
| 1:17 | 7:11    |
| 1:22 | 7:24    |
| 1:23 | 7:26    |
| 2:5  | 5:3     |
| 2:10 | 5:18–19 |

| J     | M       |
|-------|---------|
| 2:11  | 5:21–22 |
| 2:13  | 5:7     |
| 3:12  | 7:16–18 |
| 3:18  | 5:9     |
| 4:3   | 7:7–8   |
| 4:4   | 6:24    |
| 4:8   | 5:8     |
| 4:9   | 5:4     |
| 4:11  | 7:1–2   |
| 5:2–3 | 6:19–21 |

As the leader of the Jerusalem church, James urged his fellow-believers to live out the Christian life, and not only listen to God’s Word but also put it into practice (James 1:22). For James, true religion consisted of keeping oneself “from being polluted by the world” and to “look after orphans and widows in their distress” (1:27). It is a practical religion that expressed itself in unblemished and sincere personal piety as well as social compassion and responsibility. James was a steady and stabilising figure in the early Jerusalem church amid challenging social and political conditions.

The apostle Paul referred to “James, the Lord’s brother” when he wrote to the Galatians about his visit to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19). This happened three years after his conversion. Paul was known as a fierce persecutor

of Christians and after his conversion had to explain his faith in Christ and gain the trust of Christian leaders. He met Peter and James. Paul gained their confidence and he mentioned how “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me” (Galatians 2:9). It is significant that James appears first in the list of pillars of the church. He was reputed to have the highest of virtues and was known to be a man of much prayer, so much so that his knees were mentioned to be as hard as those of a camel, according to the ancient historian Hegesippus.<sup>2</sup>

In what could have been his final visit to Jerusalem, Paul went to see James after his arrival. James was there with the elders in the church. They advised Paul to join the purification rites of four men who had made a vow. This was to put a stop to rumours that Paul was inciting Jews to go against the Laws of Moses (Acts 21:17–26). Paul took the advice of James and the others, and went to the temple to join the purification rites. But trouble awaited him and he was finally arrested after some Jews from Asia Minor stirred up the crowd against Paul.

According to Christian tradition, James was killed around AD 62 when the religious leaders tried to stem the rise in belief in Jesus by asking James the Just to stand at the pinnacle of the temple to deny the divinity of Jesus. Instead James stood there to testify that Jesus was raised

from the dead and was seated at the right hand of God and was coming again. A Sanhedrin of judges sentenced James to be pushed off the pinnacle for breaking the Law. When the fall did not kill him, they stoned him. Someone then hit his head with a heavy club and killed James, who while dying, prayed for his persecutors, just as Jesus his brother did.<sup>3</sup> Origen noted in the third century his agreement with the assertions of Flavius Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, that the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem and sacked it in AD 70 as a consequence of the unjust assassination of James the Just.<sup>4</sup>

## JUDE

It is very likely that Judas, who is named as one of the brothers of Jesus in Mark 6:3, is also the writer of the New Testament book of Jude.<sup>5</sup> (There are scholars, especially from the Roman Catholic persuasion, who argue that James and Jude were the disciples of Jesus: James son of Alpheus and Thaddeus. But this may be an attempt to downplay the role of the brothers of Jesus, in keeping with the theory of Mary's perpetual virginity). In the salutation at the beginning of the short epistle of 25 verses, the author identifies himself as "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James."

Like James, Judas, or Jude, is also reticent about his family relationship with Jesus. Instead he reveals that he



is the brother of James. With reference to Jesus, he sees himself as His servant. It is obvious that the brothers of Jesus who provided leadership in the early church did not throw their weight around just because they were related to Jesus. They did not stand apart from the believers but stood *with* them in their acknowledgement of Jesus as their Lord and God.

Jude referred to Jesus as “our Lord” (vv. 4, 21, 25) and together with the believers awaited the glorious return of the Lord. With great burden, he warned against false teachers and prophets who had infiltrated the church and who were threatening the health, unity and faithfulness of the church. Jude urged the believers to be aware of the infiltrators and to ensure that they remained in God’s love and grew into Christian maturity as the Holy Spirit enabled and guided them.

Christian tradition records Jude as a travelling missionary who went as far as Persia, who was finally martyred around AD 80 when he was crucified and shot with arrows.<sup>6</sup> Hegesippus mentions his grandchildren who encountered difficulties under the Roman emperor Domitian.<sup>7</sup>

## THE COUSINS OF JESUS

Some of the relatives of Jesus are mentioned in Scripture. Elizabeth, John the Baptist’s mother, is designated as

Mary's relative (Greek, *suggenēs*). The word is translated in the King James Bible as "cousin" but is best translated as "relative" as in other English translations. The Greek word means "someone related by blood, a kinsman or woman". We cannot therefore ascertain Mary's precise relationship with Elizabeth—was Elizabeth an aunt or cousin? Whatever the case might have been, we know that the two women were relatives. Therefore Jesus was related to Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, and also to their son John the Baptist. Many think of John as a cousin of Jesus.

We do not know how well John the Baptist and Jesus knew each other, but we do have a record of their encounter, while in their respective mother's womb. Baby John leapt in his mother's womb when his mother heard the sound of Mary's greeting (Luke 1:41–44). After their births not much is known about their childhood encounters, if any. John was circumcised on the eighth day and "the Lord's hand was with him" (Luke 1:66). He "grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (Luke 1:80). The picture is that of a rugged individual who spent much time in the wilderness. There are theories that he was connected, at least for some time, with the Essene community that was living in the Judean desert. The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered between 1946 and 1956, are believed to be connected with the Essenes, a

group of devout Jews who rejected the corrupted temple authorities in Jerusalem and pursued separation and purity.

There are some similarities between John and the Essenes, such as ritual washing and separation. But there are also significant differences, the key one being John's message about Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>8</sup> John was probably a desert saint who gathered a small group of disciples around himself when he broke out into public life in Judea to speak prophetically against the powers that were, preaching a baptism of repentance and holiness.

Jesus met John at the Jordan River and was baptised by John. Some of John's disciples, then began following Jesus, even as John accepted that Jesus must increase and he decrease in significance (John 3:30). John knew that he was the forerunner of Jesus as he prepared the way for the Messiah. Because of his fearless preaching, he was eventually beheaded by the paranoid and hapless Herod Antipas (Mark 6:14–29). Matthew records that when Jesus heard about John's death, "he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place" (Matthew 14:13). It was a moment of private grief for Jesus as He mourned the loss of His forerunner and close relative.

Two of Jesus' closest disciples are also believed by some scholars to be cousins of Jesus. James and John are identified in Scripture as the "sons of Zebedee" (Matthew 4:21; Mark 10:35). Zebedee was a man of some

means, for he had hired men serving him in his fishing business (Mark 1:20). His wife was among those women who followed Jesus and took care of Him. She is counted among those present at the cross (Matthew 27:56) and identified as “the mother of Zebedee’s sons” (Matthew 27:55–56). When Matthew’s account is compared with Mark’s parallel account (Mark 15:40–41), it can be inferred that Zebedee’s wife, the mother of James and John, was called Salome. Some scholars, putting all the parallel Gospel accounts together, including John 19:25, conclude that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Salome, the mother of James and John, were sisters. That means that Jesus, James and John were cousins.

If there was this relationship, perhaps it explains why the mother of James and John approached Jesus requesting that her sons be given special places immediately to the left and right of His throne in His coming kingdom (Matthew 20:20–21). Only an aunt would be so bold as to make such a request of the Lord. Jesus declined to grant her request. Whatever the case may be, John and James were among the three members of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples, the other being Peter the leader of the group. There were special moments when only these three were given the privilege to witness and participate in, for example, the Transfiguration and the agonising prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Contrary to their mother's requests who thought that being on the right and left of Jesus would be a place of honour and privilege, James and John would have realised when they reflected on the two thieves who were crucified on the left and right of Jesus, that they did not know what they were requesting. To be on the right or left of Jesus was a call to suffer for Him. James was beheaded early in the story of the church soon after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus (Acts 12:2). John lived to a ripe old age but suffered much in the process. In his old age, he was exiled to Patmos.

At the cross, Salome must have heard Jesus tell Mary that John, her nephew, was to be her new son and that he was to take care of her. It was a natural family responsibility assigned by the dying Jesus to another close relative.

## NOT A DYNASTY BUT A KINGDOM

Two of the siblings of Jesus (James and Jude) provided leadership in the early church and contributed to the New Testament Canon. More of His siblings could have played a leading role in the church. Paul mentions "the Lord's brothers" when arguing that as an apostle he had the right to take a believing wife with him. "Don't we

have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?" (1 Corinthians 9:5). It is likely that some of Jesus' siblings and relatives could have been travelling missionaries in Palestine as well as beyond among the Jewish Diaspora.

Scholars have relied on the writings of Hegesippus, who lived in Palestine in the second century. He collected stories about the relatives of Jesus. Unfortunately, much of his writings has been lost and only exists as fragments. He was, however, quoted by the church historian Eusebius, from whose writings we have interesting information. For example, Joseph, Mary's husband, is said to have had a brother named Clopas, a rare name, unlike names such as Joseph or James. There are two instances in the New Testament where we come across Clopas. One of the women at the cross is mentioned as "Mary the wife of Clopas" (John 19:25); depending on whether this verse mentions three or four women, we can deduce further information about this Mary. If there are only three women mentioned, then this Mary was also the "sister" of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She was actually Mary's husband's brother's wife, and John may have simplified the relationship from "sister-in-law" to "sister".

A Cleopas, a variant name of Clopas, is mentioned by Luke as one of the disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus who encounter the risen Christ (Luke 24:18).

If Clopas and Mary were related to Jesus through Joseph, then perhaps “This uncle and this aunt of Jesus were among his loyal followers at the end of his ministry.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Eusebius, when James the brother of Jesus died, leadership in the Jerusalem church passed to Simon or Simeon who was the son of Clopas, Joseph’s brother.<sup>10</sup> Simon was “bishop” for 40 years until he was martyred during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan. His father’s name was probably well-known in early Christian circles; hence when John and Luke mention Clopas or Cleopas, the name would have been a familiar one among their earliest readers.

Besides these references to the relatives of Jesus, we have a further reference from Julius Africanus, who lived in Emmaus in the early third century. He mentions the *desposynoi* (“the Master’s people”)—the relatives of Jesus who dwelt in Nazareth and nearby Kokhaba who provided local Christian leadership and ministry and ventured out as missionaries.<sup>11</sup> There are also other isolated stories of relatives of Jesus providing leadership in the church in Central Mesopotamia as well as of two brothers Zoker and Simon who were grandsons of Jude the brother of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> They were persecuted by Domitian, the Roman emperor. After Zoker and Simon, references to the relatives of Jesus cease. Thus, while initially there may have been special recognition of the brothers of Jesus,

some of whom were leaders and missionaries in the early church, this reference to Jesus' relatives disappears after a while.

After James and Jude, the natural family line of Jesus quickly disappears. Paul mentions that the brothers of Jesus were married, and presumably they had children (1 Corinthians 9:5). After the brothers of Jesus, there was no more emphasis on those related to Jesus and His immediate family, no continuing dynasty of Jesus in the church.

This was neither the will of God nor the intention of Jesus who passed on leadership in the church to His disciples whom He had trained for more than three years and who were appointed by Him as His apostles (Luke 6:12–16). Apart from Judas Iscariot, who treacherously betrayed Jesus, all the others were filled with the Holy Spirit and used by God to spread the gospel—they were martyred for Christ in one way or the other.

Peter was the leading disciple, as can be noted by the fact that Peter always appears first in the various lists of apostles. Jesus told Peter that He would build His church on the rock, which was a reference to Peter's Greek name Petros (meaning rock) as well as his confession that Jesus was the "Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16–19). Jesus could also have referred to Himself as the rock (cf. Peter's reference to Jesus as the living Stone



and cornerstone, 1 Peter 2:4–8). The apostles were given special apostolic authority. “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This was a privilege given not exclusively to Peter (hence we should not entertain the notion that Peter was the first pope) as can be seen from Jesus saying the same words to the whole group of disciples in Matthew 18:18.

Binding and loosing were ideas connected with rabbinic authority at the time of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> The rabbis and teachers gave guidance and set boundaries and gave permissions in reference to God’s Laws. Likewise the apostles were given special authority to do the same—seen specifically in the writing of the New Testament books, each of which carries special apostolic authority. Paul refers to the church as being built on the “foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19–20).

There were also other leaders whom the Lord appointed, such as Paul and Barnabas who were sent as missionaries to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2). Paul became the leader of the Gentile church and appointed many others into leadership and pastoral positions: Silas, Timothy, Luke, Titus, and so on. He gave instructions to Timothy and Titus who were in charge of churches in Ephesus

and Crete respectively on how to appoint leaders in the church. He reminded Titus of the unfinished business of the appointment of elders in every town (Titus 1:5). He outlined qualifications of overseers and deacons, and told Timothy not to be “hasty in the laying on of hands” meaning that he should take care when appointing church leaders (1 Timothy 5:22). Paul instructed Timothy on the importance of spiritual succession: “entrust [what Paul had taught Timothy] to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

It is clear that leadership succession in the church was not to follow a dynastic line flowing from Jesus and His siblings. It is true that James and Jude had leadership positions in the church, but after them, there was no more clear family line connected to the leadership of the church. Instead leaders were to be appointed by God as He willed, and these were spiritually qualified men whose selection by God was to be discerned by the church when they appointed their leaders.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine what it was like to have grown up as a sibling of Jesus. What memories would the brothers and sisters have of Jesus? If they were asked to say something when Jesus was buried, what eulogies would they have given? Why did they have problems initially believing in Him? What do you think changed their minds?
  2. When James and Jude talked about Jesus, what would they have said? Do you think they were specially treated by their fellow Christians? If the other siblings of Jesus went out as missionaries, what do you think motivated them and what was their message?
  3. Why is there not a dynasty of Jesus and His family? Why is there no one today who claims to be a descendant of the family of Jesus? What is the difference between a dynasty and a kingdom and why is it important that leadership pass down spiritually rather than biologically?
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## You Can Be in the Family of Jesus

When Mary and the brothers of Jesus went searching for Jesus, they arrived outside the house where He was ministering. Because of the large crowd gathered there, they were not able to go inside but they sent word to Jesus that “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you” (Mark 3:32–35). The response of Jesus may sound unfilial at first reading, but Jesus was making use of the opportunity to teach an important lesson.

He asked, “Who are my mother and my brothers? His listeners may have been puzzled by His response to the information that His family was waiting outside. Then Jesus looked around at those who were seated around Him, and turned that circle into His family. Pointing to them, He remarked, “Here are my mother and my brothers!” Looking at their puzzled faces, He explained, “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

We cannot imagine Jesus ignoring Mary and His brothers who were waiting outside the house, and He would have subsequently met them. He may have known that His brothers were sceptical about Him and His ministry (Mark 3:21), but he would have nevertheless met them to allay their fears and doubts. Jesus was simply using the opportunity to extend His family to include all who were obedient to God.

## DOING GOD'S WILL

What Jesus remarked about His larger family makes us ask the question, “What is God’s will?” We can point to various things in answer to that question. We could think of God’s moral Law, the Ten Commandments, or to Jesus’ summary of the Law, that we should love God wholeheartedly and love our neighbours (Matthew 22:37–40). We could also think of several other answers.

What is God’s purpose for His people? In his last book, *The Radical Disciple*, the late John Stott considered the Shorter Westminster Catechism (Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever) and the Arminian point (Love God and neighbour) as possible answers to that question. “But neither seemed to be wholly satisfactory. So I want to share with you where my mind has come to rest as I approach the end of

my pilgrimage on earth. It is this: *God wants his people to become like Christ, for Christlikeness is the will of God for the people of God*" (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

Stott's observation is in line with what the Bible teaches. The apostle Paul wrote, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to the likeness of his Son*, that he might be the *firstborn among many brothers*" (Romans 8:29, emphasis added).

Here we must note two things. Firstly, God's express will is that we should be conformed to (transformed to comply with) the likeness of Jesus. We have been disfigured and our likeness of God with which we have been created has become marred. Instead of destroying and discarding us, God is redeeming us by transforming us to be like His Son Jesus. Athanasius, the fourth century Church Father, used the illustration of a portrait on a panel that had become obliterated through external stains. Instead of throwing away the panel, the artist got the subject of the portrait to sit for it again so that his likeness could be redrawn on the same material.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is that Subject in whose image we are being re-created "as we gaze on [His] kingly brightness", as a popular Christian song goes (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18). Athanasius put it succinctly when he declared, "For He was made man that we might be made [like] God".<sup>3</sup> It

is for this reason that God, in Jesus, came to us, that the Word was made flesh.

Secondly, Jesus is the “firstborn among many brothers”. By using the word “firstborn” Paul was not saying that Jesus was an ordinary human being like the rest of us who became divinised so that all of us can follow suit. Rather, Jesus, the eternal Son of God, became a man so that He could head a new family of brothers and sisters who through faith in Him would become God’s children. God’s children would be the new siblings of the divine Son of God.

God’s will is that we should be saved and made into the likeness of His Son. It is when we do this will of God that we show ourselves to be the children of God as we assume the family resemblance.

## JESUS OUR MODEL

There is no better model of doing God’s will than Jesus Himself. The writer of Hebrews declares that when Jesus came into the world, He said to the Father: “I have come to do your will, O God” (Hebrews 10:7). Jesus told His listeners, “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). In the prayer that He taught His disciples, Jesus instructed them to pray “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 5:10), thus emphasising the



importance of doing God's will in the Christian life. At one time when Jesus met a Samaritan woman at the well, His disciples who had gone into the town to buy some food returned and offered him food, but Jesus simply replied: "I have food to eat that you know nothing about" (John 4:31–32). The disciples wondered among themselves whether Jesus had already eaten, and hence His apparent lack of appetite for the food they had taken the trouble to find and bring to Him.

Jesus then said something that made His lesson clear. "My food," said Jesus, "is *to do the will of him who sent me* and to finish his work" (John 4:34, emphasis added). Jesus was pointing to a stronger appetite within Him, far stronger than physical hunger pangs. Above everything else was His desire to do His Father's will. He demonstrated this consistently throughout His life.

As Jesus faced the excruciating agony of the cross, he struggled in intense prayer. We are not just talking about physical suffering but also the unimaginable torment of being separated from His Father because He bore our sins on the cross. He who had been with the Father from eternity would now be separated from Him because of human sin. It was a depth of suffering that no human being can ever fully understand. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane with overwhelming sorrow (Matthew 26:37–38). It was such an agonising experience that the heavenly Father lovingly sent an angel

to strengthen His deeply anguished Son. Luke records that “his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground”—a description that portrays an intense struggle (Luke 22:43–44).

Amazingly, Jesus fell to the ground and in great agony prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken away from me. Yet *not as I will but as you will*” (Matthew 26:39, emphasis added). Three times He prayed this prayer, even though His three human companions fell asleep and failed to encourage Him and keep Him company. Three times Jesus submitted to His Father’s will—which was to save humankind through the death of His Son, by redeeming them and remaking them in His Son’s image. The cross was Christ’s greatest example of doing His Father’s will—even at the cost of His own life.

This incredible example of Jesus in perfectly and sacrificially carrying out the Father’s will was sung about and celebrated in an ancient hymn that Paul quotes in his epistle to the Philippians. Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8).

Jesus, God’s Son, stands before us as the perfect example of doing God’s will. Anyone who wishes to become God’s child must learn to emulate Jesus. We must learn to pray, “Teach me to do your will” (Psalm 143:10) and look to Jesus for inspiration and strength.

## FOLLOWING JESUS IN DOING GOD'S WILL

We become God's children when we receive His Son and believe in His name (John 1:12) and are born again by the regenerating power of God's Holy Spirit (John 4:5-8). When this happens by the grace of God, we are then invited to grow into maturity as God's children by following His Son every day and emulating Him in doing God's will. This journey will take us along the way of Christ, the path of the cross. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Self-denial and the act of taking up the cross represent death of the sinful self; it is to put an end to self-will (which, together with self-love, is our greatest problem) and to hold on to God's will for the rest of our lives.

We are to follow the example of Jesus but it will not be easy. In the same way that Jesus overcame Satan's temptation (Matthew 4:1-11), we will be given strength to put God's will above all human appetites, no matter how valid they may be, to overcome the pressure of popular acclaim and applause to seek only the approval of God, and to reject all forms of worship (including worldly glory and wealth) other than the worship of the true and living God. The Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit

of Jesus, will dwell within us and enable us to emulate Jesus. In fact, the Holy Spirit will help us to allow Jesus to live His life in us as we surrender ourselves to God's will—which is to save us and make us like His Son. Then we can say that “I no longer live but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

## ENTRY INTO GOD'S KINGDOM

At the end of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about the final judgment and described the kind of people who would be allowed to enter the Kingdom of God. It is not those who can speak technically correct language (“Lord, Lord”) nor those who have an impressive list of pious religious achievements who will automatically gain entry into heaven (Matthew 7:21–23). Jesus made it clear that not everyone will enter the kingdom of God “but only *the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven*” (emphasis added).

Those who do the Father's will become like Jesus who perfectly did His Father's will. They will be the ones who will look like Jesus and have the family resemblance. Hence they are the only ones who will be allowed to enter heaven which is only for the children of God, the great family of God. Those who faithfully and habitually do the Father's will come to fulfil that will—which is that we

should become like His Son Jesus. This is how we enter God's heaven.

### YOU CAN ALSO BE A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY OF JESUS

You are invited to become a part of the Family of Jesus. You can do so by becoming God's child when you receive Jesus into your life as your Saviour and Lord. Henceforth, you are called to follow Jesus in doing God's will—it will help you to fulfil God's will for you, that you should grow into the likeness of Jesus as you follow, love, obey and serve Him. As you do so, you will find yourself becoming more and more like Him. You will develop the Family resemblance.

When you are in the Family of Jesus, you also become connected intimately with the Divine Trinity, of which Jesus is one of three Divine Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity functions like a family too, especially when we consider the relationship between the Father and the Son. Jesus, being the Divine Son is perfectly related to the Father, in a relationship that is at once full of mystery. The relationships between the three Persons of the Trinity have been described by theologians as a *perichoresis*, a constant movement of self-giving love as each Person pours Himself into

another (cf. what Jesus said to the Father: “you are in me and I am in you”, John 17:21).

Beyond our imagination and expectation, we are invited by God to participate in this Divine Trinitarian community when we receive the grace and favour and love of the Persons of the Trinity. Through His grace and in Christ, God adopts us as His children when we turn to Christ for salvation and receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given to us in the One he loves” (Ephesians 1:4–6). In this life, we begin to experience the blessings and dignity of being in God’s Family. A fuller experience awaits us when the Lord Jesus returns to bring us Home to the Father. Thus “we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons” (Romans 8:23).

To belong to Jesus is to be invited into Trinitarian life, for in Him we also become intimately connected to the Trinity. Through His incarnation, Jesus assumed humanity and in His ascension and glorification, humanity is brought into the heights of Divine Life. In this way, when we become members of the Family of Jesus, we are mysteriously raised to heights we never imagined possible—we are raised to the heavenly places

and are seated where Jesus is seated (Ephesians 2:6). To become a member of the Family of Jesus will bring us incredible blessings.

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on what Jesus said, that those who do God's will are His family members. Why do you think He said this?
  2. What is God's will? How is it connected with Jesus? How did Jesus do God's will? How does doing God's will make you more like Jesus?
  3. How does becoming part of Jesus' Family make you connected with the Triune God? How would you spread the good news to others so that they too can join the Family of Jesus and be blessed beyond their imagination?
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# Endnotes

## CHAPTER ONE

- 1 See Michael Reeves, *The Good God: Enjoying Father, Son and Spirit*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012. Reeves writes, “Far, far from theological clutter, God’s being Father, Son and Spirit is just what makes the Christian life beautiful” (p. 82).
- 2 Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1995. *The Protevangelium of James* is also called *The Infancy Gospel of James*, and focuses on Mary and the birth of Jesus. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* tells some stories of the childhood of Jesus that appear to be spurious tales. See also J. K. Elliot, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006.
- 3 Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History*, tr. C. F. Cruse, New York: Merchant Books, 2011. Online version at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.toc.html>.
- 4 Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington III, *The Brother of Jesus—The Dramatic Story & Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus & His Family*, London, New York: Continuum Books, 2003.
- 5 <http://www.timesofisrael.com/oded-golan-is-not-guilty-of-forgery-so-is-the-james-ossuary-for-real/>
- 6 Michael S Heiser, “Evidence Real and Imagined: Thinking Clearly About the “Jesus Family Tomb”, <http://www.michaelsheiser.com/Jesus%20Tomb%20article%20Heiser.pdf>.
- 7 Ben Witherington, “Once more with Feeling—Did the James Ossuary come out of the Talpiot Tomb?” <http://www.patheos.com>

com/blogs/bibleandculture/2015/04/07/once-more-with-feeling-did-the-james-ossuary-come-out-of-the-talpiot-tomb/

- 8 Karen Kingsbury, *The Family of Jesus*, New York: Simon & Shuster, 2014.
- 9 Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, New York, London: Guilford Press, pp. 208–210.

## CHAPTER TWO

- 1 See also the apocryphal (circa fourth to seventh century) *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, translated by Alexander Walker from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886. Revised and edited by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0805.htm>
- 2 Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: the Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, rev. ed., Ignatius Press, 1999, pp.35–41.
- 3 *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, 2–4.
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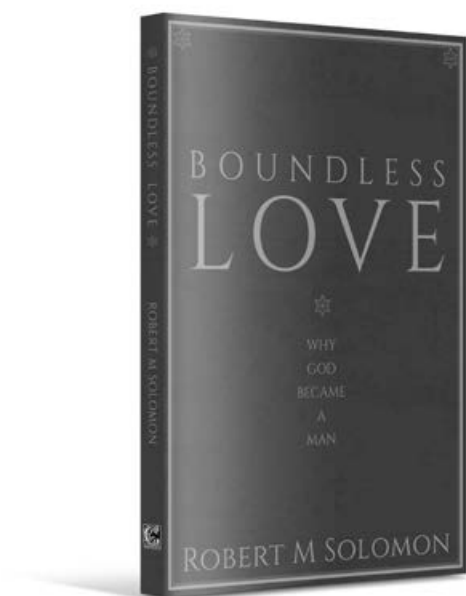
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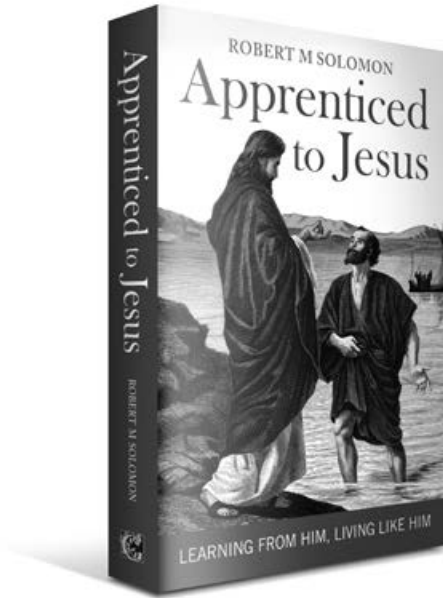
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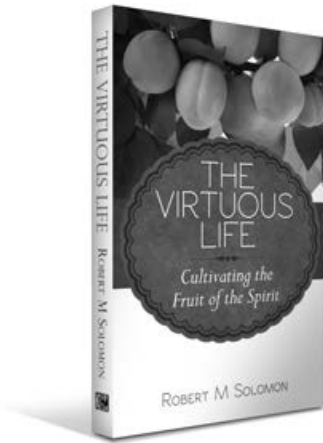
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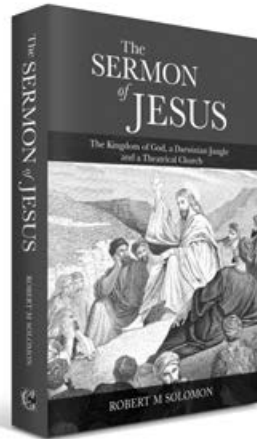
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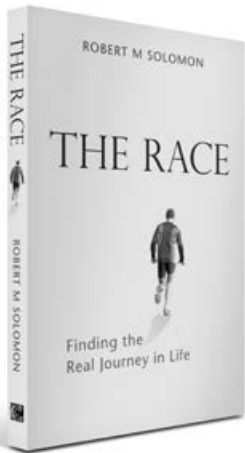
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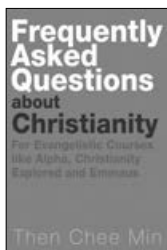
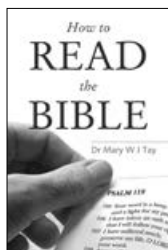
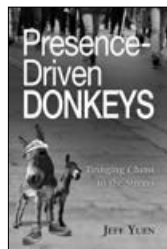
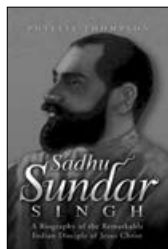
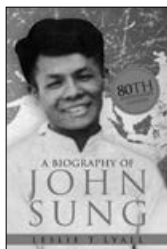
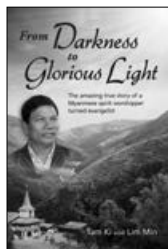
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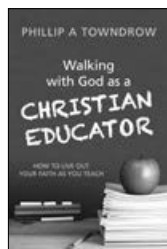
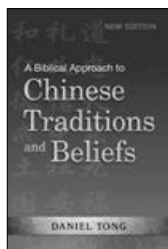
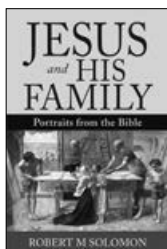
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### About the Author



Bishop Emeritus Robert M Solomon was Bishop of the Methodist Church in Singapore from 2000–2012. He had served previously as a medical doctor, church pastor, principal of Trinity Theological College and president of the National Council of Churches of Singapore. Dr Solomon has degrees in medicine, theology, intercultural studies, and a PhD in pastoral theology from the University of

Edinburgh. With an active speaking and teaching ministry in many countries, he has contributed many articles to books, theological dictionaries and journals and authored over 20 books, including *The Race*, *The Conscience*, *The Enduring Word*, *The Virtuous Life*, *The Sermon of Jesus*, *Apprenticed to Jesus* and *Boundless Love*.



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