The carpenter’s son (Mt 13:55): Joseph and Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and other texts

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to demonstrate that Joseph, the father of Jesus, should probably be seen as a legendary figure. Focusing on the witness to Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew, one can gain some clarity on the dynamics of the social world in which Matthew originated. The Matthean *Sitz im Leben* reflects the breech between ‘formative Judaism’ and Jesus followers after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Matthew’s portrayal of the Joseph tradition also mirrors the so-called particularistic purport of the Matthean community and the role Jerusalem played within this framework. This understanding of the social context of the Matthean community is supported by a historical-critical deciphering of a trajectory with regard to a legendary Joseph-figure.

1 INTRODUCTION
Initially Joseph is found in the wisdom literature of the First Testament. There he is depicted as the abandoned sibling who became an Israelite sage in Egypt. Having been called from Egypt he was the Moses prototype who rescued Israel in need. Joseph’s offspring, believed to be the forefathers of the Samaritans, were marginalised by the Judeans as illegitimate children of Israel. Nevertheless, in the New Testament Joseph became (by God’s intervention) the saviour of Mary and her child. This tradition was conveyed in intertestamental documents as well as the New Testament. It developed in a distinctive way in ‘post-apostolic’ literature, Roman Catholicism and Protestant dogmatics. In the New Testament we find this tradition behind and beyond Matthew, Luke and John. In Matthew there is the scene of a holy marriage and, as in Luke, the story of the adoption of Jesus by Joseph. According to John, Joseph is Jesus’ biological father. Historically seen, the figure of Joseph as Jesus’ father does not occur in the early sources behind Matthew and Luke. Joseph, setting aside his relationship with Jesus, also does not play a role in the Pauline literature and the New Testament documents that developed the Pauline traditions.

2 A SIMILARITY BETWEEN TWO JOSEPHS

According to Mark (6:3) Jesus was a carpenter. This tradition was changed by Matthew (13:55) to read 'the carpenter's son'. Luke ignores Mark's reference to Jesus (or Joseph) as being a carpenter and proffers only the question: 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' (Lk 4:22). Apocryphal gospels, such as the second-century Proto-James and documents and fragments thereof (eg, The life of Joseph the carpenter and Pseudo-Matthew) took over the Matthean hunch that Joseph was a carpenter but, without elaborating on this (apart from the title of the fifth-century document The life of Joseph the carpenter).\(^1\) They only mention Joseph's righteousness, the death of his wife while his youngest son James was still a child, the names of other siblings (taken over from evidence in the New Testament itself) and that Joseph was of an advantaged age (eighty-nine years) when he took Mary as wife, though he never slept with her, and that he lived to the age of one hundred and eleven.\(^2\)

In the documents of the first century it is only the Gospel of Matthew that presents any evidence that Joseph the carpenter adopted Jesus as his son. However, the alluded analogy between father and son in this text does not concern craftmanship or even Jesus' relationship with Joseph. Also in the Coptic Arabic version of The life of Joseph the carpenter, chapter 7 (see Manns 1977:87) the correspondences between father and son do not pertain to a mutual career, but to geographical issues. What we do find is a similarity between two Josephs: Joseph the widower who took the pregnant Mary into his house and Joseph the First Testament patriarch (see Manns 1977:82, 87). The equivalent to the parallel of the two Josephs is the parallel between the character of Mary and that of the First Testament Hannah (1 Sam [LXX] 1:11). The Mary-Hannah parallel is found in Proto-James and the above-mentioned dependent apocryphal documents.

Characteristic of Mediterranean mores is that the residential site of a family/clan is located at the burial place of the founder of the group (cf Jeremias 1985). The tomb in turn is the place where a future leader is expected to be born. This leader will continue the work of the forefather. In The life of Joseph the carpenter the tradition is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem as is the case in those gospels in the New Testament where this tradition is also taken up (Mt 2:6; Lk 2:4; Jn 6:41; 7:27, 41). In all these instances the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and Joseph whose ancestors are claimed to be from Bethlehem is in focus.

This particular tradition, explicit in Matthew and implicit in Luke and John, originated in the prophetic witness (Micah 5:2) against the supposedly mighty Judean

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\(^1\) These documents were written (maybe translated into either Coptic or Latin) during the period from the end of the fourth century to the sixth century.

royalty in favour of an allegedly inferior ruler whose roots are in Bethlehem. The prophetic voice in Micah 2–5 is raised against the lack of righteousness among the elite in Jerusalem. Bethlehem (i.e., Ephrat—see Gen 48:7) is the burial place of Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. The prophet Jeremiah (31:15) speaks of Rachel weeping about her lost descendants. Matthew (2:17–18) also quotes this passage in connection with the good tidings that the child Jesus outlived the onslaught of the ‘king’ in Judea (Herod the Great), only to be killed at thirty in Jerusalem because he was believed to be the ‘newborn king’.

In agreement with the Samaritan Book of Joshua in Arabic, chapter 43—see Coggsins (1975:122)—(retold slightly differently by representatives of the present-day Samaritan community in Nablus; Kahen 1966: 5–8; Ishak s a:8–16) the Samaritans consider themselves ‘original Israelites from whom the Jews split off in a schism under Eli who moved the ark of the covenant from Shechem to Shiloh’ (Pummer 1987:3). They claim to be descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh, sons of Joseph born in Egypt. The mother of Ephraim and Manasseh is Asenath, the gentile daughter of the Egyptian Potiphera (Gen 42:50), priest at Heliopolis (On). Manasseh and Ephraim are the children God gave to Joseph and they were, according to Genesis 48:1–21, legitimised by the head of the covenanted family, Jacob (Israel), in terms of a near-eastern judicial practice of adoption (see especially Gen 48:12).

Like father like son; like Joseph the patriarch, victim of slander, rejected by his own people, sold for twenty pieces of silver (Gen 37:28) but exalted over all the Egyptians at the age of thirty (Gen 41:46), Joseph’s son, Jesus of Nazareth, was hated by the Judeans and belittled as demon-possessed, a sinner, a Samaritan, an illegitimate person (see Jn 8:31–59; especially verse 48). Also like Joseph the patriarch who became an example of compassion and who forgave and loved his brothers (Gen 50:17), Jesus, in Johannine terms, loved the cosmos (i.e., the Judeans) despite its hate.

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1 There were two villages in ancient Israel with the name ‘Bethlehem’. The one was situated in Sebulon, seven miles northwest from Nazareth (see Jdg 12:8, 10). The Bethlehem, referred to in Micah, lies six miles southwest from Jerusalem: ‘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 be the shepherd of my people Israel’ (Mi 5:2, in Mt 2:6).

4 In ancient Babylonia twenty pieces of silver was the price paid for a slave. In Nuzi (circa 1500) it was thirty shekels and in Ugarit forty. According to Exodus 21:32 it was thirty (see Van Selms 1967:187).

5 Against the claim that Jerusalem is the ‘city of David’, the Johannine school knew the ancient northern tradition that the nascence of the messiah, son of David, should rather be sought at Rachel’s tomb at Ephrat (Bethlehem) where Rachel (Jacob’s wife and mother of Joseph) died during Jacob’s journey from Bethel.
3 THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW AND OTHER TEXTS

The gospel tradition in the New Testament mentions very few things about Joseph, reportedly the father of Jesus. The only things we read about are the references to his righteousness, his Davidic ancestry, his dream and the angel's conversation with him, and his 'holy marriage' with Mary (who stands in the line of the 'impure' women Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's wife Bathsheba). Matthew depicts Joseph in legendary fashion as someone who took his family, Mary and the child Jesus, to Egypt. By means of a fulfilment formula, Matthew (Mt 2:15) quotes the prophet Hosea (11:1) in saying that God called back his child from Egypt to settle in Galilee, land of the gentiles. Hosea is implicitly connected with the Joseph tradition in terms of his marriage to an impure woman so that God's sovereignty to act outside the conventional cultic structures could be proclaimed.

Matthew (2:18) also narrates an attempt by Herod the Great to kill the 'newborn king'. Herod was the 'king of the Judeans' who was ironically from 'bastard' background. Matthew reports this attempt in terms of another fulfilment quotation, taken from the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 31:15): 'Rachel weeping for her children...because they are no more.' While holding onto the importance of the Davidic household, Jeremiah nevertheless expected a totally new beginning in order to make an end to the atrocities of the royalties and their priestly retainers. The Gospel of Luke does not share this material peculiar to Matthew, but clearly has explicit knowledge of the tradition that Bethlehem is the location of the Joseph family. He also knows that the origin of the saviour of all people (Judeans, Samaritans and Galileans alike), according to the prophets, is not to be sought in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem. When Luke, in the speech of the 'Hellenist outsider' Stephen in Acts (7:55–56), draws an analogy between Stephen and Jesus by retelling the story of the patriarchs, research shows that Luke is dependent not on the Judean (Masoretic) but on the Samaritan Pentateuch (see esp Scobie 1973:393–396). In this speech (Acts 7:1–53), as well as the record about the 'Samaritan mission' headed by Philip (Acts 8:1–4), the controversy between the two tribes Judah and Joseph is to be read between the lines.

Matthew's saying (also in other gospel traditions) of forgiving one's brother is one of the central characteristics of the portrayal of Jesus. The motive of compassion and forgiveness of sin by Joseph the patriarch is also the most outstanding theme in the intertestamental pseudepigraph The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. The gospel tradition in the New Testament shares and in striking ways makes use of this tradition in its depiction of Jesus. Hollander (1981:65) refers as follows to the ideal-type character of Joseph in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (my emphasis):

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6 Galilee is referred to in Isaiah 9:1; 1 Maccabees 5:15 and Matthew 4:15 as 'Galilee where the heathens live'.

...it is the patriarch Joseph above all who plays a pre-eminent role in the ethics of the Testaments. Not only in his farewell-discourse is Joseph put forward as a good example for his sons, but his brothers too refer to him on their deathbeds, exhorting their sons to be like Joseph. He was one who kept himself free from adultery, who never stopped loving his brothers, who was full of mercy, compassion and forgivingness, who humiliated himself. He was a righteous man tried by God and rewarded and exalted afterwards.

In the Testament of Benjamin (4:2) one reads: 'The good person has not a dark eye. For (s)he shows mercy to all people, even though they are sinners' (Hollander 1981:69-70) and, in Testament of Benjamin (4:4d): '...on the poor person (s)he has mercy; with the weak (s)he feels sympathy'. In the Testament of Zebulon (6:5; 7:3f; Hollander 1981:73) the same attitude towards the poor and feeling of sympathy towards the weak is described as virtues of the patriarch Zebulon, imitating the attitude and feeling of Joseph. In the Testament of Gad (4:1-2), in a passage where Gad instructs his children, a very remarkable phrase appears which the gospel tradition in the New Testament attributes to Jesus: Gad reveals that 'lawlessness' against the Lord amounts to disobedience to the words of God's 'commandments concerning the love of one's neighbour, and its sins against God' (Sklar 1996:51). These instructions clearly go together with the confession of one's own sin and repentance and an ongoing forgiveness of the sin of others (see T Gad 6:3-4, 7). Here we have a clear resemblance of the Matthean Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:12) and in the essence of the Ten Commandments (Mt 22:37-40). These words in the Testament of Gad refer to Gad's memory that Joseph wronged him several times. He also reminds himself of his bitter hatred towards Joseph so that he 'very often...wanted to kill him' (T Gad 2:1), and his (and Judah's) own covetousness by selling Joseph for 'thirty pieces of gold' (cf T Gad 2:3-4).

In the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs there are clear parallels between Jesus, recorded in the gospel tradition, and Joseph the patriarch. An example is for instance the references to Jesus' death on behalf of others. These deliberate resemblances, seen from another angle, should not surprise us. In the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs next generations are instructed to imitate 'our father Joseph'. It is therefore noteworthy, also with regard to the first-century Josephus, that the biblical Joseph's relationship with his brothers emerges as that part of the story which is most similar to Josephus' own life. In her work on The Figure of Joseph in Post-Biblical Literature, Maren Niehoff finds: 'For one reason or another, Joseph seems to represent for each narrator a certain Idealtype' (Niehoff 1992:52).

The same is true with regard to Matthew's Joseph and the Joseph depicted in the romance Joseph and Asenath. The latter is a Hellenistic-Semitic romance which

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9 Whereas the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, in its present form, is dated in the second or third century ce, but actually goes back to probably the second century bce, Joseph and
focuses on God’s intervention in the life of Joseph the patriarch (parallel to the Joseph in the gospel tradition) to take Asenath, an ‘impure’ woman, though a virgin, into his house. It is a story of a ‘holy marriage’. Most striking is the reference (JosAs [Ph] 15:7–8), in the so-called shorter constructed version of Marc Philonenko (1968), where Sophia is replaced by the figure Metanoia (referring to Asenath): ‘And Metanoia is a virgin, very beautiful and pure and chaste and gentle; and God Most High loves her, and all his angels do her reverence’ (see Standartinger 1996:309). Christoph Burchard’s (1965) longer constructed version (JosAs 17:9 [B]), reads as follows: ‘(What a) foolish and bold (woman) I (am), because I have spoken with frankness and said that a man came into my chamber from heaven; and I did not know that (a) god came to me’ (Standartinger 1995:311).

One has to keep in mind that Asenath’s virginity is not mentioned in the Genesis account. However, both the nature of Joseph’s marriage to Asenath and her virginity were widespread literary topics as early as the first century CE. For example, Josephus (JA 2.9), parallel to Joseph and Asenath, refers among others to their ‘most distinguished marriage’ and Asenath’s virginity.10 This reference alone rules out the possibility that the author of Joseph and Asenath took this topic over from the evidence in the New Testament. What is in all probability the case, is that both the tradition in the gospel material in the New Testament and documents such as Joseph and Asenath share a common idealization of Joseph’s holy marriage. It is furthermore remarkable to notice that ‘rabbinic Midrash is...concerned with Asenath’s alien origin and (that) this disturbing fact is accounted for in numerous ways.’11

There are New Testament scholars who regard both the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and Joseph and Asenath as totally or to a great extent dependent on the New Testament. This opinion is not really convincing.12 These arguments, however, will take us on a road that does not suit the purpose of the present study. My concern is to focus on the references to the correspondences between father and son, between

Asenath is dated in the period between 100 BCE and 115 CE (cf Chesnutt 1996:286).
12 With regard to the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, see especially De Jonge 1975:96–110; and with regard to Joseph and Asenath, see Price 1997. Over against De Jonge, Hollander (1981:10) argues that the Testaments ‘are certainly not a Christian composition’. However, it does not mean that I deny any Christian interpolation at all. The reference in the Testament of Joseph to the ‘lamb of God’, born from a virgin who takes away the ‘sin of the world’ is in all probability such an interpolation. These arguments concern a set of complicated issues with regard to intracanonical relatedness, the order of passages caused by editorial activity, probable and less probable hypotheses regarding dates of documents, of the clustering of ‘canonical’ groups of literature and locations of the audiences of these documents and corpuses of documents in order to expect knowledge thereof et cetera.
Joseph and Jesus. Actually, in this regard, referring to Joseph as the father of Jesus at all is highly problematic. These references do not occur in writings originating in the period before the beginning of the separation of the Pharisaic synagogue and the church after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the termination of the earliest Jesus movement in Jerusalem.

No known father played a role in the life of the historical Jesus. Joseph does not occur in the early sources: not in Paul, the Gospel of Mark, the Sayings Gospel Q, or the Gospel of Thomas. We meet Joseph for the first time in those documents that dispute the defamatory claims of the opponents of the Jesus movement, Matthew, John and Luke, and eventually the dependent Proto-James and Pseudo-Matthew. For Greek-speaking Israelites Joseph was an ethical paradigm. For Pharisees he was the symbolic adversary of Judah. For them he was the forefather of people who either came from the pagan world or mixed with them. In other words, the Joseph-people were regarded by the Judeans as bastards because they were a mixture of the children of God and gentiles, people who should be treated as if they had no parentage.

4 A JOSEPH TRAJECTORY—A CHAIN OF SEVEN LINKS

4.1 A trajectory through early Christianity

It has become clear that parallels exist between Matthew’s understanding of Jesus as ‘son of Joseph’ and themes in Greco-Israelite literature (including the Talmud and texts like Wisdom of Solomon and Joseph and Asenath). These parallels do not necessarily imply a direct source dependence, but indicate common thinking. However, they do not constitute a ‘mass of disorganized’ parallels. A clear trajectory can be discerned. The ‘background’ or ‘environment’ of the biblical world should therefore not be mastered by reducing it to a mass of disorganized parallels to the New Testament; it must be reconceptualized in terms of movements, trajectories...’ These words (my emphasis) are quoted from James M Robinson and Helmut Koester’s book Trajectories through early Christianity.

13 After having commented on the parallels in the tradition concerning the birth of Jesus and the remainder of the Gospel of Matthew, Anthony Saldarini (1994:167-177) makes the following observation: ‘The author of Matthew drew upon this rich and varied tradition when he stressed God the Father of Jesus in the birth narrative (chap.1). At the same time, he brought a variety of titles, roles, and scriptural passages to bear on Jesus in order to establish him firmly within the biblical worlds and further mark him out as a special figure in Israel...’ (Saldarini 1994:176).

14 In the introduction of this work Robinson writes: ‘We now have, as a result of two centuries of critical historiography, its limitations notwithstanding, a history of early Christianity which makes indisputable the theological change from Jesus to Paul, from Paul to Mark or Ignatius, from Ignatius to Irenaeus or Origen, and then to Augustine or Athanasius. This is not simply a case of random variety, of pluralism. A more penetrating analysis reveals individual items to be exponents of intelligible movements...Such sequences of development have come to the surface in the course of the critical historical research of the past generations. Yet the
However, it is true, as James Robinson also realises, that the term trajectory 'may suggest too much determinative control at the point of departure.' But it does not need to be so.\textsuperscript{15}

In Matthew's gospel the Joseph trajectory begins with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. The book Isaiah occurs within the Hebrew Scriptures, but the quotation comes from the Greek translation that originated in a Hellenistic environment. Matthew’s quotation focuses on the expectation of an ideal king as well as on the motive of a Moses-like deliverance. This focus should be understood in the light of the Bethlehem-Jerusalem controversy. We have seen to which extent this controversy relates to the Joseph-Judah conflict. Luke has something different to say concerning the notion of Mary’s virginity. The lukan birth story is told within the context of Greek myths about deities and the emperor cult of the Romans. John does not elaborate at all concerning the aspect of virginity. However, the Joseph figure plays a remarkable role in John’s gospel. His understanding of Joseph within the context of the Jerusalem-Bethlehem controversy is in some sense similar to Matthew’s. Both these gospels originated against the background of the antagonism of the Pharisaic Academy in Jamnia towards the Jesus-movement during the period after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Paul and Mark wrote a good few years earlier than Matthew, Luke and John. Both Paul and Mark do not know anything about either Joseph or Mary’s virginity. Even Mary, according to Mark, does not regard Jesus as someone of high esteem. Likewise, a complete silence with regard to both Joseph and Mary prevails in the rest of the New Testament.

During the second century a steady development in a totally new direction is discernable. In \textit{Proto-James} the Joseph figure serves to support the new upcoming belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary. Other documents and theologians took up this line. During the Middle Ages exactly the same Joseph motive, which occurred in the previous stage, is now used to support the dogma of the Trinity. One can explain this development, from its beginning to the end, with the image of a chain consisting of seven links. However, the silence with regard to Joseph in the documents closest to the historical Jesus, presents a missing link in the center. The overlays in the gospel tradition fill the emptiness in the center.

\textsuperscript{15} Robinson (1971:14) notes: 'At one stage of a movement a document may function in a specific way, have a certain meaning or influence on the movement; at a subsequent stage on the trajectory that document, unaltered, may function or cut in a different way, may mean in effect something different, may influence the movement differently.'
4.2 The first link—the saga in the First Testament

The first links contain the Joseph saga in the First Testament. This story is well known. It is about acceptance despite rejection. It is a story of tension within Jacob’s family. Jacob’s other name is Israel. The twelve sons in the family do not have the same mother. Rachel, Israel’s beloved wife, is the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. All the sons, however, have the right to be called children of their ancestor Abraham. The records in the First Testament about the twelve are not fully in concordance with one another. One particular tradition would like to put Joseph on a pedestal. According to this bias Joseph was not his brothers’ equal because he did not work with them in the fields. His father had prevented him from doing manual labour with his brothers, by giving him a special multi-coloured robe. Such a robe is not for labour. In the same vein, this tradition records that the first-birth right was taken away from both the oldest, Reuben, and the second in line, Judah, because both of them shamed their father by their sexual misbehaviour. Later in the story Joseph reportedly stood steadfast against any temptation.

The father’s favouritism, a common feature in Mediterranean culture, is clearly seen when Joseph gossiped to his father about his brothers and received no reprimand. The direction of the story develops from slander to rejection. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and abandoned. Outside of the Promised Land he continued to play his role as the beloved son of his father. The pharaoh of Egypt exalted him ‘because of his father’s God’ (Gen 41:38-39; 50:17-18). His exaltation is the result of God’s intervention in his life. He married, from the perspective of his brothers, an impure woman. However, this became a ‘holy marriage’ because the children, born of this union, strictly speaking also impure, were legitimised by Israel when he adopted them into the circle of God’s covenanted people.

Mediterraneans are accustomed to judicial retribution: an eye for an eye. Joseph, meeting his brothers again, responded with an act of forgiveness and compassion. This is the first link.

4.3 The second link—a pair of tribal sticks

Joseph’s children, born in Egypt, became the forefathers of the people living in the Holy Land in the region north of Jebus. They had their own places of political power and cultic worship. Since the Israelites entered Canaan there was tension between the two tribal groups, the Makarites/Shechemites (Joseph’s children) and the Judeans. After Joshua’s return from Egypt the tension mounted. The restoration of Judah got underway when David, from the tribe of Judah, became the leader of all Israel. David and Solomon were the peacemakers. To this end they chose Jebus/Salem, since then called Jerusalem, as a neutral location for political power and cultic worship. However, in the long run it was of no avail.

Two empires came into being. Prophets tried to unify the two groups. Ezekiel, for
example, would have liked to transform the ‘pair of sticks’ (Ezek 37:15-28) into one.\(^\text{16}\) However, the northerners continued to pray to God on mount Gerizim, close to Shechem, Joseph’s burial place (see Josh 24:32). In Judea Jerusalem was the symbolic center of the power of the Davidic family, the economy of the land and the Jahwistic religion. The Judeans tried to silence their opponents by creating the myth of the lost ten tribes. The Judean priests legitimized this bias by canonizing their version of the books of Moses. The northerners, however, had their own version of the books of Moses, the so-called Samaritan Pentateuch. For the puritan Judeans the name ‘Samaritan’ was equivalent to being a bastard, a people with no right to enter the temple in Jerusalem because they were not the ‘true’ children of Abraham. Here the second link ends.

### 4.4 The third link—the failure to restore defamation

The prophetic voice (of Micah) was looking to a new king in Jerusalem, who was expected to come from the grassroots of Bethlehem. In the same vein another prophet (Hosea) predicted that a ‘son of God’ would come from Egypt. The expectation of an ideal king illustrates the failure of the Judeans’ restoration of the defamation of the house of David. This failure to restore defamation, is the third link. At this stage the air was pregnant with the peasants’ expectation of a popular king. For the ‘northerners’ the ‘son of Joseph’ would be this king.

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\(^{16}\) Similar apparently conflicting announcements occur in the book of Micah (chapters 2–5). It simultaneously supports the continuance of the Davidic dynasty and criticises the exploitation of the peasants by the elite. Ezekiel prophesised in the same vein, using the metaphor of two tribal wood sticks: The word of the Lord came to me: Child of Humanity, take a stick of wood and write on it, Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him. Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, Ephraim’s stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him. Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand. When your countrymen ask you, Won’t you tell us what you mean by this? say to them, This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am going to make the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim’s hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it into Judah’s stick, making them a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand. Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on and say to them, This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children will live their forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever...’ (Ezek 37:15-25; NIV – my emendation and emphasis).
4.5 The missing link—father absence in the life of Jesus

Jesus, however, did not see himself in the role of a king. Furthermore, no biological father played a role in his life. History does not reveal a figure like Joseph at this point in time. His family thought he was insane. His wisdom subverted conventional culture. His heart and deeds were filled with compassion and anger because of the pain against which the prophets had already protested. The powers that be killed him as a nobody. There was no family tomb in which his body could be laid. This link is about the story of the historical Jesus.

4.6 The fifth link—overlays in the gospel tradition

The people, who were attracted by Jesus' message about God's all-inclusive presence, looked at Jesus with new eyes after his death. They began to adore him in terms of the expectations the prophets had of God's messiah who would inaugurate a dispensation of righteousness. They used names taken from Israel's scriptures and the surrounding world to express their adoration. Simultaneously, those, who saw it as their task to maintain the conventional wisdom with regard to their images of God and culture, opposed this movement by labelling its 'founder' and its messengers. In Mark Jesus is called the 'prince of the demons'. As in Paul's letters, one can trace in Mark a tradition that goes back to the earliest Christian movement in Jerusalem. It is clear that, from the very beginning, the community of Christian believers was diverse with regard to their understanding of what the core of Jesus' message really was. Although both Paul and Mark used the traditions transmitted from the Jesus-movement in Jerusalem, they changed some essential aspects.

What was common in this early phase, is that no one knew about Jesus' miraculous conception, or that Joseph was his father. The silence with regard to Joseph represents the missing fourth link in the Joseph trajectory. The gospel tradition in the later documents (Matthew, Luke and John) have 'overlays' which fill up the empty centre in the tradition that originated in Jerusalem and was adapted by Mark. This earliest tradition knew neither about Joseph's link to Jesus nor about the mission of the Christian movement among Samaritans. In this tradition there is also no knowledge of the virginal conception of Jesus. Matthew and Luke, using Mark as source, filled the gap against the background of a particular process and mind-set. The process was that of the separation between the synagogue and the church that started after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. The mind-set was that of apocalypticism which both Matthew and Luke took over from Mark, among others. All three these documents understood the death and resurrection of Jesus in the light of an apocalyptic mind-set.

The apocalyptic expectation was that this world would be transformed into the final kingdom of God. The vicarious death of a martyr was an important dynamic in this expectation, because the martyr died on behalf of others in order to procure a
better future for them beyond death. According to a specific prophetic tradition this new age would dawn when the nations came to Jerusalem to join the unified Israel. In Mark and Luke the focus is on moving from Jerusalem to the gentiles. Luke, in particular, geographically divides the world into concentric circles: Judea, Samaria and Rome, symbolising the greater world. The Joseph tradition, as we have seen, is very much intertwined with the notion of Samaria. Jesus was seen as the precursor coming from Bethlehem (the cradle of the 'Samaritans'), entering Jerusalem as Israel's messiah after he had journeyed from Galilee through Samaria to Jerusalem. For Matthew the journey into the pagan world was not at issue anymore. The focus was on the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' in order that the temple in Jerusalem could become the house of prayer for all nations, including the impure and the outcasts.

The social location of Luke's audience differed from that of Matthew. Matthew is either a Syrian or Galilean gospel in which a tendency to both conformation with and separation from the (Pharisaic) synagogue is to be found. The Pharisees remained the advocates of the ideology even after its destruction. An aversion to the so-called Samaritans formed part of this ideology. The defamation of Jesus on account of his illegitimate background seems to be part of this aversion. Matthew apologised by explaining that Jesus' birth was the result of an intervention by God. However, he conformed to the synagogal view by explicitly denying that Jesus or his followers ever went to the region of the Samaritans. Matthew represents the Judean emphasis of only one Israel as if the 'northern stick' does not exist at all.

For Matthew the Son of David was the messianic Son of Man who was expected to inaugurate the utopia for the lost sheep of Israel. Paradoxically, Matthew departed from synagogal policy by emphasising the ingathering of the social outcasts into the (symbolic) kingdom (which did not concretely exist anymore) and, therefore, into God's kingdom. For Matthew, as for Mark, the Jesus kerygma became the message of an apocalyptic death, although he did not mention Jesus' death being for the benefit of others. The only hint of such an idea in Matthew's gospel (Mt 26:26-29) is the eucharistic formula which he (cf. also Paul in 1 Cor 11:23-26) took over from Mark's version (Mk 14:22-25) of the convictions of the Jesus faction in Jerusalem.

Luke also knew of the illegitimacy charge. His audience was probably located in Ephesus in Asia Minor. The conflict between the synagogue in Jamnia and the Christian communities also had its influence far beyond the boundaries of Roman Palestine. This was the case in Asia Minor where the emperor granted judicial rights over Israelites to the synagogue. The defamation on account of Jesus' illegitimate background seemingly originated in the synagogue probably because of his 'fatherlessness'. Luke represents the prophetic tradition of the re-unification of the

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17 The Jamnia Academy did not see Jesus' illegitimacy as the outcome of rape. Second century rabbinical Judaism saw it this way on account of a satirical reading of the traditions of Jesus' birth found in Matthew and Luke. They created the so-called Ben (son of) Panthera tradition as
north and the south. This can be seen in his tripartite mission to the Judeans, Samaritans, and the gentiles (Acts 1:8). The Samaritans were, according to Luke, a necessary link backward of the ‘mission’ to the outcasts in Judea, and forward to the gentile mission.

Luke, like Matthew, knew that a man called Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father (cf Lk 3:23). We have seen that the earliest tradition does not reveal any knowledge of Jesus’ parentage except the suggestion of his ‘fatherlessness’. A solution to the question where the perception that Jesus was the (adopted) grandson of either Jacob (Mt 1:16) or Eli (Lk 3:23), the father of Joseph, could originate is called for. Evidence directs us to the Pharisaic tradition from the Jamnia Academy. For the puritans in the Judean tradition it did not take much to use the label ‘son of Joseph’ for a man of alleged illegitimate background, also known for his association with prostitutes and other outcasts. Seen from the Christian perspective, the Joseph legend was also used in the apology found in the gospel tradition. This apology concerned both Jesus’ subversion of the Judean ideology and the defamation it evoked. The post-Easter Jesus movement filled the gap caused by Jesus’ ‘fatherlessness’ in its own way. Their exaltation of Jesus as the risen Christ and Lord was, among others, substantiated by placing him in succession to the forefather Joseph, the first testament patriarch. According to the Joseph saga in the First Testament, God exalted Joseph despite slander.

Furthermore, early witnesses, like Paul and Mark, knew the tradition that the historical Jesus called upon God as his father. Calling God his father was an act by which Jesus claimed to be a ‘child of Abraham’, despite the defamation concerning his ‘fatherlessness’. In the same vein the Q tradition (Lk 3:8/Mt 3:9) contains a statement by John the Baptist which critically rejects the self-confident assumption of the Israelites that they have ‘Abraham as father’. This statement was made within the context of Jesus’ baptism. According to John the Baptist ‘God can produce children of Abraham from desert stones’. In Matthew (3:7) this statement was directed at the Pharisees and Sadducees. In this respect, both Jesus and John the Baptist represented the critical voice of the prophets against the royal hierarchy, and both were also killed as a result of this.

4.7 The sixth link—for the sake of a dogma

Whereas the fifth link in the Joseph trajectory consists of the gospel tradition that fills the absence of a Joseph figure in the life of Jesus, the material in the sixth link coincides mainly with the development of post New Testament Mariology. During this phase we find Joseph as ‘passively’ active. Christians used the Joseph legend to support the upcoming belief in Mary’s immaculate conception and perpetual virginity.

a satirical play of words on parthenos, the Greek word for virgin. Panthera was the name they gave the so-called Roman soldier who allegedly raped Mary.
According to this dogma, Mary conceived without sexual intercourse. No sperm or male seed entered her womb. This doctrine used the Gospel of John to support its argument. The author(s) of the Gospel of John (1:13) refers to God's children as people who are not born of natural descent. They have the right to be called children of God. This right is not comparable to being physically born as someone's child. To be 'born from above' (Jn 3:5–7) eliminates human decision or a husband's desire. 'Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit' (Jn 3:6). The Joseph legend provided the material for later doctrinal development. Roman Catholicism's Mariology and Orthodox Protestantism's focus on Jesus' divinity have been supported by the use of the Joseph legend. This relates to the belief that Joseph did not have intercourse with Mary.

The roots of this tenet came from the second-century church father Ignatius. He understood Matthew 1:23 as a reference to Mary's virginity in relation to Jesus' divinity: 'For our God Jesus the Messiah was conceived by Mary according to the plan of God: on the one hand of the seat of David [cf Rm 1:3], on the other hand of the (H)oly (S)pirit [cf Mt 1:18, 20].' These two themes (Mariology and Jesus' divinity) specifically form the plot of the story about Mary in the second-century document Proto-James. In later centuries writings such as The Life of Joseph the Carpenter and Pseudo-Matthew elaborated extensively on these themes.

4.8 The seventh link—the carpenter is deadly alive

The seventh link is the last in the Joseph trajectory. In my discussion of the trajectory it has become clear that there is an enormous distance between the empty centre and the traditions in the gospels and post New Testament documents (cf Oberlinner 1975:73–78). Meier, in his A marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus, volume one: The roots of the problem and the person (1991:317) admits that '...the total silence about Joseph is significant.' However, he does not think that this gap is an 'unbridgeable gulf' (Meier 1991:353 n 7).

According to Meier, there is 'converging evidence of the notable silences found in the Four Gospels and Acts, all of which have references to the mother and brothers (and sometimes the sisters)'. For him the traditional solution, already known in the patristic period, remains the most likely (Meier 1991:317). According to some church fathers Joseph was already dead when Jesus began acting in public. The first hint of

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18 Ignatius, Ephesians 18:2; see also Smyrneans 1:1 and Trallians 9:1. Notice also in 'Ignatius the typical blending of elements from the Johannine tradition (Jesus is God), Matthew (conceived by [the virgin] Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit), and the pre-Pauline tradition (of the seat of David)” (Meier 1991:237–238 note 43). The concept of Mary's descent from David becomes more explicit in Justin; see, e.g Dialogue with Trypho 45: "...the Son of God...submitted to becoming incarnate and being born of this virgin who was of the line of David.” See also Proto-James 10:1 (cf Meier 1991:238 note 43).
this idea can be found in *Proto-James*. Here Joseph is portrayed as a very old man when he took Mary into his home. According to the church father Epiphanius (*Panarion* 3.78.10—written circa 377 CE) Joseph died shortly after the family visited the temple in Jerusalem with the twelve-year old Jesus (as recorded by Luke 2:41–52).19

I cannot see how Meier could seriously consider the patristic evidence as historically authentic. This evidence uncritically links Joseph’s death with the episode of the twelve-year old Jesus in the temple. It is almost impossible to argue for the authenticity of this scene. Secondly, it is totally unthinkable in Mediterranean culture to tell a story of a man (in this case Jesus) without mentioning his father in some way or another. A male figure in the Mediterranean world without an explicit connection to his father, is someone without identity. Meier (1991:353 n 5) is right when he argues that when Jesus mentioned a sister belonging to the household of God, he had his earthly relatives in mind. I find it difficult to see that the silence about his earthly father would imply that his father was already dead at that particular time. One would rather expect that, if Jesus used his earthly family as analogy for God’s heavenly family, the role of the father would be important. Given the importance of the father in Mediterranean culture, how would one cancel out the role of an earthly father?

In my view the other possible explanation to which Meier also refers, fits in better with the converging evidence in the relevant material closest to the historical Jesus. The father could have abandoned the family. It seems that the reason why he would do this, had to do with the conception of Jesus. Historically seen, we know nothing at all of the circumstances of Jesus’ conception. Furthermore, there is no historical reason (including New Testament evidence—cf Lk 2:7)20 why Jesus should be seen as the first-born. The suggested abandonment by the father could have had certain consequences that would conform to the information which we can discern as historically probable.

- Jesus’ tension with his family;
- Jesus’ defence of the fatherless;
- Jesus’ judgment of the abandonment of women (and children) by an act of divorce;
- Jesus’ calling upon God as his father;
- Jesus’ criticism against the Jerusalemites;

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20 William Whiston ([1960] 1978:415), the translator of Josephus’ works, refers in a footnote to Izates, the ‘only-begotten’ son of Helena, the queen of Adiabene, as the ‘one best-beloved’: ‘Josephus here [Ant. xx.ii.1] uses the word monogene, as only-begotten son, for no other than one best-beloved, as does both the Old and the New Testament; I mean where there were one or more sons besides, (Gen. xxii.2; Heb. xi.7.)’ In Lk 2:7 the expression *ion prototokon* is used.
the absence of a family tomb as his last resting place.

Nonetheless, for other patristic fathers Joseph the 'woodworker' was still 'deadly alive'. According to the patristic scholar, Argyle (1956:199-202), one does not find references to Joseph, the First Testament patriarch in the prophets. However, as I have shown, the prophetic voice with regard to the conflict between the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom is very much embedded in the Joseph saga. For example, in Amos 6:1, 6 we read: 'Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria...You drink wine by the bowfull...but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph'[NIV] (see also Ezek 37:15–17). We have also seen that Joseph was more directly mentioned from the second century BCE onwards.21

A similar pattern with regard to Joseph being simultaneously 'dead' and 'alive', can be found in both Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism Joseph became an ethical paradigm for repentance (see Schimmel 1981:60–65). Seeing Joseph as an ethical example also found its way into Christian thinking. The First Testament saga of Joseph the patriarch provides an abundance of material for elaboration: he was 'a righteous man afflicted and sold by his brethren, steadfast in resisting temptation, unjustly accused, arrested, the benefactor of others, tender hearted, forgiving his brethren who had wronged him' (Argyle 1956:199). The patristic fathers made use of this ethical paradigm in two ways: (1) as prefiguring the incarnation, passion, and exaltation of Jesus;22 (2) as providing a model for Christian character and conduct.23

The seventh link of the Joseph trajectory is therefore actually open-ended. In Christendom some think Joseph died early in Jesus' life. Others think he lives as an ethical symbol. And, to me, it seems that Joseph is a legend. Within Christendom the Joseph tradition clearly developed as a trajectory. There is no trace of a father who fulfilled a role in Jesus' life in historical Jesus material. For Jesus, God filled this emptiness.

21 See Wis 10:13f; Sir 49:15; 1 Macc 2:53; Jub 39–43; 1 En 89:13; JosAs; Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.

22 For Joseph as prototype of Jesus, see e.g. Justin Martyr, Dial c Trypho 36; Tertullian, Adv Marcionem 3.18; Adv Judeos 10; Origen, in Genesim, Hom 15; Cyprian, Liber de bono patientiae [Migne 4. col 652–653]; Jerome, Ep ad Riparium presbyterum, n. 2 [PL 908]; Chrysostom, in Gen 37, Hom 61 [PG, 54 col 528]; Hom 84, Mt 26:51–54]; Ambrose, De Joseph Patriarcha, 14 [PL, 14 col 646]; Augustine, Ep Cl, 3 c 39 [PL, 33 col 919]; Quaest in Heptat, 148 [PL, 34 col 588]; Cyril of Alexandria (see PG, 69 col 376); Bede, in Pentateuchum Commentarii Gen 37–38 [PL, 91 col 265–266].

23 For Joseph as an allegory of Christian conduct, see e.g. Athanasius, Apologia ad Constantium Imp, 12 [PG, 25 col 609]; Gregory of Nyssa, Contra Fornicarios [PG, 46 col 493f]; St Basil, Sermo 19 (De Temperantia et Incontinentia [PG, 32 col 1348]; Epistles, 2; 46 (Epistolae Clarius, 1); Cyprian, Ad Fortunatum de Martyrio [PL, 4 col 693]; Liber de zelo et livore [PL, 4 col 666]; Chrysostom, Hom, 44, Gen 41:46–49, n 7; Bede, in Marci Evangelium Exposito, Lib 4 [PL, 92 col 279].
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