

I Joseph

KJ (Tim) McDonald

Preface

“I Joseph” is a biography of the life of Saint Joseph, the husband of Mary the Mother of Jesus, of his life, that of a typical Jewish boy and young man, before he married Mary and then, his thoughts, words and actions as he became the foster father of Jesus and protected and love both Jesus and his mother. events recorded in the Gospels as translated in the Jerusalem Bible.

This book is the fifth in a quintet of books inspired by the Bible. They have been written in a novel way, pun intended, to encourage us all to read through the Bible as one would read a novel, to develop the full context from which the quotations and short passages we are familiar with are drawn, and add to their richness.

The quintet is:

I Adam: The Old Testament told through the eyes of its major players, those who could stay faithful to God as Adam could not but whom Adam in Limbo wished he could be. “So the first man, as Scripture says, became a living soul,” (Corinthians 15:45)

I Mary: The New Testament told through the eyes of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

I Paul: The Acts of the Apostles dealing with the life of Paul, interspersed with his Letters in their chronological order.

I Peter: A biography of the life of Peter - his early life, his life as a follower of Jesus, his life and death as the first head of the Christian Church, his letters.

I Joseph: A biography of Joseph, the husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus.

I Joseph

I have no pretensions to fame and fortune. I am a simple craftsman, a carpenter. I speak in simple terms. I live a simple life in a village in the region of Galilee in the far north of Judea, its name is Nazareth. Its only claim to fame is an obscure Bible verse said to refer to the Messiah: “He will be called a Nazorean.” Maybe that refers to our Nazareth, plenty of other rabbis doubt that, rabbis love to debate, our rabbi is not slow to press our case!

Jerusalem

Shortly after my fifth birthday, I journeyed with my parents to Jerusalem for the first of many times. We joined a caravan of people from our village and other villages nearby. My parents had a donkey and a little cart. I walked and played with the other boys and rode in the cart when I was tired. At night we all camped by a big fire, said the Shema and other prayers and sang songs. We reached Jerusalem four days later. There was a huge crowd there, the streets were filled with people, all on their annual pilgrimage to the Temple.

I stood in awe in the outer courtyard of the magnificent Temple. I felt my God’s presence as never before. I was uneasy about the stalls around the walls, the raucous crowds, the yelling and haggling, the merchants and money-changers urging their goods and services on anyone nearby.

I have been to Jerusalem many more times, sometimes more than once a year. We certainly go as a family every Passover, travelling in a caravan with all our cousins’ families as well as many of our friends from nearby villages. Robbers, rebels and arrogant Roman soldiers are a threat to any small group of travelers. The journey takes most of four days, each evening we camp in the open, light fires, say the Shema, eat, sing songs, sleep under the stars. The caravan moves at a steady but slow pace each day. We boys move around, play games and keep to ourselves, rejoining our family only when the caravan halts for the night.

There is always a huge crowd in Jerusalem. We rent the same rooms every year, close by the Temple in the middle of all the action. There is lots of noise, the streets are filled with people, all on their annual pilgrimage to the Temple.

Each year I stand in awe in the outer courtyard of the Temple. As always, I feel my God's presence as never before. I remain uneasy about the stalls around the walls, the raucous crowds, the yelling and haggling, the merchants and money-changers urging their goods and services on anyone nearby. My temper flares now I am older but I do nothing. God deserves much more respect than this.

Passover

The Passover, I know, is a meal celebrating the time when the Jewish people, enslaved in Egypt by Pharaoh, fled across the Red Sea, miraculously opened up for them by Moses' staff. Pharaoh's army was delayed in its pursuit by the shock of the 10th plague God inflicted on the Egyptians, the death of every first born child in every Egyptian household. The Jewish first born were spared by the angels of death, their homes protected by the blood of lambs sprinkled on their doorways. Before they fled north the Israelites ate a final meal centered on the lambs they had killed for their saving blood. When Pharaoh had recovered from the shock of the death of his own first born he sent his soldiers after the Israelites, sent them into the trench dividing the Red Sea, sent them to their deaths as the watery sides came tumbling down. We reenact this saving event each year at the first full moon after the Spring Equinox.

We ate the Passover meal as a family the day before the Sabbath. But each day we males visited the Temple and stood in the People's Court as the priests entered the Holy of Holies and made sacrifices of animals, birds and produce to God on the altar erected over the very rock on which Abraham secured his son Isaac and brought down his sword towards that fragile neck, obeying God's command but prevented from the final act by an angel, his obedience and faith earning him the covenant with God and the legacy of countless descendants, foremost the Chosen People.

So, each year I went with my family to Jerusalem at this time and on several other occasions as well.

Pharisees and Sadducees

My parents had told me there was another religious party in Israel besides the Pharisees. I was at first confused by this, believing there is just one true God. I thought we should all worship Him in the same way and abide by His commandments and teachings set out in the Bible and the Talmud. My parents explained that all human beings do not have the same beliefs about serving God. The Pharisees believe in strict adherence to a whole lot of laws and prohibitions, many about the tiny details of life, how to get dressed, what to wear, what to eat. I realize now they are very proud of their strict beliefs and standing in Jewish society. My father had a phylactery and so did all his male friends and now I have one. It is a small leather box containing Hebrew texts on vellum, worn by our Jewish men at morning prayer as a reminder to keep the Law. I notice that the Pharisees have very wide phylacteries, decorated lavishly, telling everyone how important they are. Their phylacteries are full of texts of hundreds of laws and prohibitions.

My father had told me the other religious party in Israel are the Sadducees. He said they had the political power in Israel and they controlled the Temple and the worship and sacrifices held there. He told me the Sadducees were very different to the Pharisees. They were the priestly aristocracy. To them religious duties were firmly centered on Temple worship. They accepted only the Torah, the written Law of Moses – the first five Bible books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - as authoritative, and rejected the other books as well as the detailed prescriptions for living the Jewish life set out in the Talmud. As a result, the Sadducees denied many of the doctrines held by the Pharisees including the resurrection of the dead, the existence of angels and spirits, and the meting out of rewards and punishment after death.

He said the Pharisees, on the other hand, were a lay group more representative of the common man. They controlled the many synagogues where they taught the Law and its interpretation by leading rabbis from long ago. In addition to the written Law of Moses, the Pharisees accepted as authoritative the rest of the Old Testament, as well as the "traditional interpretations by the elders" set out in the Talmud.

Sanhedrin

My father explained that these two religious parties were the core of the Jewish court system called the Sanhedrin, an institution created by Moses. The Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem was the supreme

religious body in Israel, an assembly of 71 sages who met in the Chamber of Hewn Stones in the Temple in Jerusalem. The sages comprised Sadducees, Pharisees, lawyers, scribes and wealthy men.

When I was just a child, my father explained to me that the Great Sanhedrin dealt with religious matters, criminal matters, trials of adulterous wives, tithes, preparation of Torah Scrolls for the Temple, drawing up the calendar and the solving of difficulties relating to ritual law. By our time the Great Sanhedrin had lost its authority to inflict capital punishment which was reserved to the Roman governor.

He said the Sanhedrin required a minimum of two witnesses to convict a suspect. There were no attorneys. Instead, the accusing witness stated the offense in the presence of the accused and the accused could call witnesses on his own behalf. The court questioned the accused, the accusers and the defense witnesses.

Childhood and Teen Age Years

Along with all the other boys approaching puberty I attended educational sessions in the synagogue. Our rabbi taught us to read the Bible and to transcribe its verses onto vellum. So, in a simple way, I could read and write. Our rabbi encouraged us to read a verse or two and comment on its meaning, all simple stuff. We would not have dared to speak to the whole Sabbath assembly as some of the men did.

My father was a carpenter so I became one also, my brothers and sisters choosing another path. Basically, I was apprenticed to my father. He taught me to take care of my tools and how to use them. Together we made a good team and I began to love what we created together – roofs of houses, doors and windows, floors and interior walls, tables, chairs, beds and other furniture. The occasional storm wreaked damage on one or more houses, those of the widows and orphans we repaired for free. Extra furniture too if needed.

When I was 20 years old my father died. We buried him with due solemnity and I missed him dreadfully. But I believed we would meet again in the afterlife. I became the only carpenter in our

village, indeed in the walkable distance from our village. I built a cart to carry my tools and timber, I bought a donkey to pull it.

Marriage

I first saw Tabitha when I was repairing a window in her parents' home, broken by a branch in a storm. She was 14 years old, I was 21. I was besotted with her and took every opportunity I could to visit her home or stroll by the village well when she was getting water. I guess her parents quickly figured out my real intentions, and, Yahweh be blessed, they approved of our relationship. My sister visited Tabitha and found her to be as interested in me as I was in her. Time passed rapidly: we exchanged glances and smiles, we came to love one another, I asked for her hand in marriage, I was approved, we were betrothed, I signed the kebbutah contract with her father, we were married a year later.

Our wedding was a huge affair, I knew so many people in the area. I had 12 months warning so I built a house for my wife and, we hoped, our children, no problem there as we came to see! How I loved Tabitha and how she loved me.

Because I am a carpenter, I managed to build a large house, made bigger over the years by extensions warranted by the birth of the next child. We were blessed by God, we eventually had six children, four boys and two girls. We were a strict Jewish family. My wife, Tabitha, and I and our children worshipped the one true God. In the late evening we prayed the Shema and said psalms. On the Sabbath we all walked to the synagogue where my wife and our daughters sat apart from myself and our boys. Our Rabbi, our teacher, who is a Pharisee, chose a passage from the Bible and explained it to us, adding in laws and regulations from the Talmud. Much of what he said was obscure to me, I wanted more. I sought a life not of regulations alone but more about love, love for my God, a loving faith imbued in all of my family. As the Shema states, "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."

Present Day

But I am a true Jew, born to Jewish parents, circumcised on my eighth day, taught the Bible and the Law of Moses. I wear a phylactery, a velum pouch filled with bible verses and Talmud regulations, but I do not flaunt it. I will live according to the Law and I will die a true Jew but I seek fellow believers who want more also. I find them in my brother Cleopas, my friend Joachim and our new Rabbi, John. Our ages span 15 years, we find that adds more depth to our discussions.

We each claim a rich heritage. John claims descent from Aaron, the first High Priest and brother of Moses, through a long list of names of leaders of the tribe of Levi. Cleopas and I are delighted to find that Joachim is a direct descendent of King David, as are we.

We four meet in the afternoon of the Sabbath. Our homes are not far apart so we are permitted by the Law to congregate. This day Cleopas began the discussion, saying that in our previous meeting we concluded the history of the Hasmonean Dynasty. He reminded us,

“After the return from exile in Babylon, legitimized and assisted by Cyrus, King of Persia, over the years the migrant Jews rebuilt not only Jerusalem and its Temple, but most of the land of Judea as well. Judea became a nation again in a world basically at peace. But Alexander the Great brought war and turmoil back again, leaving Judea bang in the middle of the conflicts between Egypt to its south and Greece to its north and east, conflicts either side won and lost under the succession of five Greek kings, the victors often taking a toll on Judea as they passed through.”

Joachim continued,

“The years passed, many Greeks came to settle in and dominate Judea. The fifth Greek king, Antiochus IV, determined to make Judea a Greek State, his allies and supporters in Judea being the Hellenists, Grecophiles or lovers of Greek culture and religion, whether by birth or by indoctrination. The Temple was violated, circumcision forbidden. Antiochus personally caused a revolt by executing the mother and her seven sons who refused to eat forbidden pork, publicly executing them in an extremely barbaric manner - whippings, tongues and private parts cut off, bodies fried alive over a large pan atop a roaring fire. Under the Maccabees Judea revolted and defeated the Geek armies. The sons of Mattathias became the Hasmonean dynasty of kings, high priests and victorious military commanders. This line of kings, directly in the line of lineage from

King David, lasted for over 100 years, with Judea free and at peace. Fueled by the Jews who had spread all over the world, Judea expanded from the ancient tribal lands of Judea and Benjamin into Samaria (the old Israel, home to the other ten tribes), Galilee, Iturea, Perea and Idumea (the old Edom), a tempting prize for any empire builder.”

I continued:

“Then came the Romans, intent on turning every nation on the Mediterranean into a Roman Province. Judea made its own bed. Hyrcanus and Aristabulus, grandsons of the previous High Priest, both laid claim to the Jewish throne and civil war loomed. The victorious Roman general, Pompey the Great was asked to intervene but then the competing Roman general, Julius Caesar, began a much larger civil war with Pompey, each seeking to create the Roman Empire, him its head. Pompey was killed in battle, Julius Caesar was assassinated four years later. Enter Antipater.”

Our Rabbi continued.

“Antipater was not a Jew, rather an Idumean or Edomite. But Idumea was now part of Judea so he claimed to be sort of a Jew. Antipater schemed his way into the court of the weak wannabe king Hyrcanus, surmising he could become the power behind this throne. And so he did, persuading first Pompey and later Julius Caesar, whose life he saved in a war in Egypt, to make Hyrcanus’ son, the King of Judea. The Romans agreed, Antipater made sure the successor Hyrcanus II was a pathetic King so the Romans demoted him to High Priest and made Antipater the Procurator and actual ruler of Judea. This was the end of the Hasmonean dynasty and, indeed of a Jewish nation ruled by a king in the line of David.”

Cleopas responded.

“Because Antipater made his two sons kings of the south around Jerusalem and the north based on Galilee. The more aggressive and conniving son Herod the Great soon had it all and proclaimed himself King of the Jews, the Roman Senate acquiescing to that just 30 years ago - in our lifetime – not yours Rabbi! But Herod is not a Jew and is certainly not in the line of King David. We despise him, he is not our king.”

John, our rabbi, intervened,

“But he did rebuild the Temple, and a glorious place it is. And he built the huge harbor of Caesarea Maritima and many other magnificent edifices.”

Joachim intervened,

“Yes, a wonderful man indeed! He murdered the only remaining claimant to the Hasmonean kingship and he married Mariamne, the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II, seeking some legitimacy for that mock kingship he gained with the support of the Roman Senate. As for his first wife Doris and their son, where are they now? Who knows? We are not fooled, he is a ruthless pretender and a brutal murderer. Who knows what he will do next?”

The weeks passed, time became months, then years. We four continued our discussions and our friendship grew. My daughters married when they were 15 years old, my sons when they were about 20, each wedding a gala for the whole village and our many friends in the surrounding countryside. The only sad time was when my mother also passed away and was entombed in our family cave.

Empty Nester, alas Widower

My home was suddenly empty except for my wife and myself. Then came the worst day of my life. A scorpion bit Tabitha as she was collecting thorn bushes for our fire. She died the next day in extreme agony. I held her hand till the end. My children and I carried her embalmed body to our family cave. All the villagers came to show their respect. A group of wailing women and a piper led the way. I spoke some words from the Bible over her tomb, my voice breaking as my tears flowed:

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.

The heart of her husband does safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.

She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

She rises also while it is yet night, and gives meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.

She considers a field, and buys it: with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

She girds her loins with strength, and strengthens her arms.

She perceives that her merchandise is good: her candle goes not out by night.

She lays her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff.

She stretches out her hand to the poor; yea, she reaches forth her hands to the needy.

She opens her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.

Her children rise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.

Many daughters have done virtuously, but you excel them all.

Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised.

My three friends were a huge solace for my grief. But as time passed another death was to assail our group. Joachim, who was a shepherd, had moved to Jerusalem to fulfil a promise made to God, but after a few years he returned to Nazareth. I had six children, Cleopas had six children, our rabbi had four children, alas Joachim had only a daughter and she had come late in the lives of Joachim and Anne, his wife. The child, Mary, was a dear person, a lovely nature, a charming girl, their gift from God. But Joachim explained she would never wed, he and Anne had made a promise to God that if they had a child, the child would be dedicated to Temple service and would be a virgin for life. So they placed Mary into Temple service when she was five years old, and there she took a vow to be a virgin for life. They lived in Jerusalem until they were sure she was settled, then returned to Nazareth. Mary had become almost a granddaughter to an old priest, Simeon, and a very old priestess, Anna.

But the expected lifelong Temple service never happened. Our group supported Joachim as his wife contracted a severe fever, our daughters nursed her and cared for Anne and Joachim. Mary was sent from the Temple to see her mother for the last time. When my wife died, I had the support of my six children and their families, also my brother Cleopas and his huge family. It broke our hearts to see Joachim and his 12 year old daughter stumble as their tears blinded them, walking in solitude to the tomb and we all watched as Anne's body disappear forever into their tomb. The wailing women and the lone piper added extra poignancy to the moment. We all cried and moaned.

Joachim was a mess, his heart so clearly broken. His own health deteriorated. Mary decided to stay with him, he needed her now like never before.

Two years passed. Our group continued to meet, sometimes Mary served us with drinks and eats she had prepared. I grew to love her appearances, she moved my heart. Joachim became more and more housebound, then bedridden. Mary, as a girl or young woman, could not go out alone for water and food. My sons and daughters sometimes accompanied her, sometimes I did. Cleopas and I made sure there was enough food and even wine, also fuel for the fire. We met now in Joachim's house, trying to bolster his spirits. But his life was done, his only concern was the future of his daughter.

Joachim asked to meet alone with me. I wondered what he wanted to talk about but, of course, the topic was Mary and her future. He told me of his deep love and regard for me and praised the person that I was, stating only I could he entrust with Mary's future. He told me of her vow of virginity for life, he asked me to marry her! I was dumbfounded. I said I was flattered, I would think about it but surely Joachim could see the conflict, a beautiful young maiden with a vow of lifelong virginity and a virile middle-aged man who already had six children and grandchildren as well. What would happen if I desired her, how could we both sleep in the same bed night after night? Maybe that would not be a problem for this old spent body.

Four times an angel from heaven would visit me. This first time was to give me strength, to assure me I could marry this beautiful 14-year-old girl and protect and support her vow of virginity. I prayed to my God, I asked for help and strength as I would many times in the coming years. I grew convinced that God wanted me to protect Mary in every way. I swore a vow to my God that I would protect her, soul and body, to the end of my days.

The next day I said Yes to Joachim, but what does Mary think about this, I wondered. Joachim was prepared for my question. Mary had confided in one of my daughters when Joachim forewarned her of my meeting with him. Mary had said, “I know Joseph from his visits to our home to speak with my father and I like him, finding him to be handsome, joyful and sincere in nature. I know I will have no say in whom my father chooses to be my husband but I am happy with his choice and I know I will come to love Joseph from whom I immediately feel security and affection.”

So I accepted Mary for my future wife, signed the ketubbah contract with her father and we were betrothed. Her father wished for only a small dowry and our marriage was set for a year hence when Mary would be 15 years of age.

In the usual Jewish form of marriage, on the set date we would consummate the marriage at Mary’s home. She would wait with her maiden friends for the arrival of myself and my companions. We two would enter the chuppah room and consummate the marriage while our companions waited and celebrated outside. I would hand the bloodied "proof of virginity cloth" to the witnesses chosen by her father, who would then give it to Mary for safekeeping. After the consummation, our wedding party would walk to my house in a procession for a wedding feast. At the conclusion of the wedding feast, we would be married.

In other words, we both knew the central requirement of the Jewish marriage is that the bride be a virgin and be publicly proved to be so. A future husband could refuse to conclude the marriage if his bride was found not to be a virgin. Since the betrothal lasted for over a year, during which the couple certainly did not have sexual relations, finding out his betrothed was not a virgin, worst still pregnant, would cause him great embarrassment and make him ask the question: “Who is the father of her child, who has done this wrongful deed to me?”

I only found out later that Mary also had an angel, Gabriel his name. All I saw in her was a profound peace, a strengthening of her nature, a calmness and resolution. I met with Mary in her father’s house. She told me her cousin Elizabeth was with child and asked if she could visit her for the last three months of her pregnancy. Again I was bewildered since I had been told several times over the years of Elizabeth’s sad fate. Women who could not get pregnant were scorned and laughed at in

Jewish society, Elizabeth and her husband Zachary were advanced in years and childless forever, it was thought. And where did Mary get the information that they were to have a child?

Since we were betrothed, Mary asked my permission to visit her elderly cousin and support her through the last few months until the child was born. I couldn't figure out what was going on but I acquiesced. I accompanied her on the 80 miles to Jerusalem and then found a caravan to take her to the village of Ain Karim in the mountains of Judea. She wanted to go alone, that reason would also be known to me but not yet.

The full story would be known to me much later. How Mary entered the house of Zachary and Elizabeth unannounced, how Elizabeth blessed her and so did the baby in her womb who leaped for joy. For she, as did Mary, knew Mary was also pregnant, had been chosen by God to be the mother of His Son. Mary blessed God with words that would resound through the centuries, her Magnificat.

Before this event, of course, was the drama of doubting Zachary, stricken dumb for not believing Elizabeth would have a child, but his speech restored when he named the boy John as the angel had instructed him to do.

Mary returned to Nazareth a month before our wedding date. I didn't know why but she looked really scared. We embraced but she stepped backwards to stand beside her father who held her hand. She told me she was with child, not from human intercourse but by the Holy Spirit. I was flabbergasted, I heard the word "pregnant," the rest passed me by. Then I heard again "Holy Spirit," I did not understand this at all – there is no precedent in all of human history, no story in the Bible with a child conceived by God alone. I could not speak, I was silent for a long time. But I loved Mary, I could not judge her or condemn her. I was frozen in time, my heart almost still, I saw Mary's sadness, she was pregnant and I was not the father of her child. What indeed about her lifelong vow of virginity?

I needed time to process this. But I could see Mary needed me to say something. I beat back my tears and told her I would conclude the betrothal privately and no-one need know of her condition. She could go away for a time, maybe back to her cousin's, until the child was born. She could then decide what her future might be. I could see the pain and suffering on her face and the shivering in

her body. But she had no explanation, not one that human beings could understand. She cried as she looked at me, clearly she loved me still. She thanked me for my goodness and went into seclusion in her father's house. I left their house, her father was also bewildered but he looked very sick.

I sat all afternoon and evening in my workshop. What on earth could I do? I could not eat, I could not pray. Mary! Any other betrothed girl, but Mary! I had watched this girl grow up, I had known her for years. We had often embraced, sometimes held hands, a few times lightly kissed, this is unbelievable, how could she do this to me? Had somebody attacked her, oh why didn't I take her all the way to Ain Karim?"

I fell into a doze in the early hours of the morning. Then came my angel for the second time. I leapt out of bed when the rooster crowed, I was on her door step before the dawn fully broke. Mary told her father what I said as she came to her door.

"Joseph returned to meet with me this morning. His face was white with fear and amazement. He told me he had slept little the previous night but that he loved and cherished me, so he had again resolved, not wanting to disgrace me publicly, to send me away secretly. But as he lay in restless sleep, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying,

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

He knew then, he told me, that our son would be the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of our people. He told me he recalled Isaiah's words,

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign.

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and you shall call his name Immanuel, God is with us.”

And so we were duly married. My daughter was Mary’s companion and my sons were mine. My brother Cleophas also lived in Nazareth and he had a large family and they, and many of our friends, all came to our wedding feast. I told my children that the wedding ceremony would be brief (but the wedding feast very festive) since it was not my first marriage and that the ritual of the proof of virginity need not be necessary. They accepted this, maybe believing I was not able to have sexual relations any more. In any case that was the least of our problems.

For as her pregnancy progressed and it was obvious Mary was with child, clearly conceived before our marriage, many people came to know our secret. My faith in God survived these judgments and the gossip that surrounded them, but Mary lived a 15-year old girl’s worst fear, she was pregnant before we were married. Frowns and whispered insults made her life a misery or would have, had it not been for her unwavering faith in God. As far as all our friends and relatives knew, except for her cousin Elizabeth, her child was my son. My upright reputation went down the drain. Cleophas and our Rabbi stood by me, knowing nothing, but all others assumed the baby had been conceived while we were still betrothed and we had to bear the shame and unspoken accusations of that. Yet Mary repeatedly told me that a better and more honorable man never graced this earth. She humbled me, her faith was stronger than mine, the difference in our ages meaning nothing.

Mary’s father died shortly afterwards. We entombed him alongside his wife, Mary’s mother. She was devastated and now an orphan, but I would always protect and support her. I loved her as much as any husband loved his wife, even more so, but I accepted that she was a virgin, would always be a virgin, I would always love and cherish her. I too knew God had a role for me and I made a vow to fulfil it.

The Birth of the Child

The Roman soldiers came to our village a few months later and read a decree from the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. We had to travel to our own city, Bethlehem, David’s birthplace, to be registered for taxation. We closed up our home, joined a caravan and I walked beside Mary as

she sat on our donkey, since she was by now very pregnant and expecting to deliver the child any day.

I was devastated that I could not find a room in the Bethlehem inn but I begged the innkeeper, he took pity on Mary's condition and said we could stay in the stable out back. I prepared a manger bed for a cradle from the straw and found a mid-wife to assist her. By now her labor had started and she was gasping with the pains. I held her hand as the child was born, unable to help and suffering with great compassion the pain all true husbands do. When the baby came, her pains stopped and we were both overcome with joy. The midwife made sure the baby was breathing, then dried and wrapped him in swaddling clothes to keep him warm. He cried and gurgled. When the afterbirth came, the midwife cut the cord and placed our God in Mary's arms. There is no way to describe the incredible feeling we both had at that moment. But He was also a baby and a hungry one and Mary placed Him to her breast to feed him. We could never have imagined the joy and delight that we felt – our God was our child.

Then a strange mysterious thing happened. God and His angels were also overjoyed that the Son of God had been born, a helpless little baby lying in poverty in a manger in a stable, kept warm by the breath of the animals around Him. A procession of shepherds started coming by our stable, saying they had been told by an angel that the savior, Christ the Lord, had been born that day in this stable in the town of Bethlehem. They had seen a multitude of angels in the heavens, praising God, singing,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men of good will

so they decided to come and see the Child for themselves. They fell to their knees and worshipped Him. When they left, praising and glorifying God, they said they would spread the word around the region, that they had seen an angel and he said to them,

Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

I did not know what to make of all this and neither did Mary. How easy is it to believe that the Son of God would call us Mother and Father?

Our time in Bethlehem

We moved from the stable into a house once the census crowds departed. We asked one of the local priests Mary knew from her in the Temple to circumcise our child on the eighth day and we named him Jesus as the angel had dictated. On the fortieth day we travelled the five miles to the Temple in Jerusalem, purchased a pair of turtle doves and gave them to the priest for the purification sacrificial ritual required of all Jews when a child is born.

Another strange event then happened. Mary called “Simeon!” and I saw her beloved Simeon coming towards us. He smiled at us, took our Jesus into his arms and blessed God, saying,

Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

Mary and I looked at one another, we were surprised and amazed at Simeon’s words, but Mary later told me how he had often looked strangely at her those years before when he taught the Temple girls the prophecies of the Messiah.

Simeon blessed us and said to Mary strange words that nevertheless chilled her to the bone.

Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Then her dear old Anna, her very old, very revered Anna, came over and hugged her, saying to all the same message, thanking God for sending the Messiah, this Child.

After the sacrifice, Mary and I returned with our child to our home in Bethlehem. I had obtained work as a carpenter but it was not to last. The final strange event connected to Jesus's birth was about to happen, it's after effects were to be devastating.

One afternoon, a royal cavalcade arrived outside our little house. Three men, dressed in royal clothes, asked to see our child. They prostrated themselves before him and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Later they explained they were from a country far to our east. They had been following a star prophesied to lead them to a baby who would be the king of the Jews and of all nations, the promised Messiah. The star led them to Jerusalem where they met with King Herod and explained their mission. The mention of a baby who would be king terrified all who listened to them, they knew what Herod's reaction would be. Herod immediately assembled the chief priests and scribes and asked them where the prophecies said the Messiah would be born. They told him it was Bethlehem according to the prophecy,

And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.

The Magi told us that Herod spoke to them alone, asking the time when the star appeared. He then sent them to Bethlehem, asking them to find the child and return to tell him so that he might also come and do homage. They were very suspicious of his attitude and had been warned in a dream not to follow his wishes. Once they left Jerusalem, the star reappeared and led them to our home. They said they would return to their country by another route, avoiding Jerusalem and Herod.

Exile in Egypt

I was very concerned about their story and I was right. That very night my angel appeared for the third time and told me,

Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you.

Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.

We were gone by morning, with just a few clothes and our donkey to carry the child. As we journeyed to Egypt, other travelers told us the terrible aftermath. When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the Magi, he became furious. He ordered the massacre of all the 2,000 boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the magi.

Helped by the gold the Magi had given us, for we had nothing else, we settled in a village in Egypt where there were other Jews and a synagogue. I resumed my work as a carpenter and Jesus grew into a wonderful little boy, full of love and affection. He loved to watch me at work and played with the wooden toys I made for him. He was just a normal little boy, but oh so special! We stayed in Egypt for four years until I was told by my angel in a fourth dream,

Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel,

for those who sought the child's life are dead.

We recalled the words of the prophet,

Out of Egypt I called my son.

Our Life in Nazareth

When we reached Israel we were afraid to return to live in Bethlehem with a child of the age that matched the slaughter, it was too close to Jerusalem and Herod's son, Archelaus, whose reputation matched his father's. So, we went back to Nazareth, to the family home. Again, the prophecy was,

He shall be called a Nazorean.

So I smiled to think our rabbi was right! It was beautiful to watch our baby grow, to crawl, to walk, to talk, to laugh, to smile. He was an ordinary little boy, out playing in the street with his friends whenever he could. Occasionally he would stumble, fall and skin his knee or elbow and come running in to Mary, tears streaming down his face. She would put some ointment on his injury, give him a hug, let him nestle his head into her shoulder until his breathing became normal, then smile as he would jump to his feet, calling “Thanks, Mother” over his shoulder and be off out the door to play again.

The Boy Jesus

It was even more wonderful to watch Jesus grow into a sturdy boy. He studied the Bible in the synagogue, learned to read and write Hebrew, played games with the other boys, did his chores for his mother, helped me and learned the trade to become a carpenter himself. We knew he was the Son of God but he was also fully human. He did not use his being God to avoid the gradual maturing that all boys and young men pass through. He was quick at his lessons but he had to learn to read and write and become a carpenter just as any other boy would have had to do. Mary and I were pleased to be able to help him to read and write, given the education Mary had been privileged to receive and me less so.

He was aware that one day His Father would ask him to take up His mission, that of teaching, curing, revealing and ultimately sacrificing Himself but the realization of all of this came to him in his human mind at a gradual rate. What a 30-year old Son of God could barely cope with in his mind could not be borne by a 12-year old in his mind. Mary said she came to realize all this gradually, better able to help him prepare for the mission his Father had sent him on and joining him in its fulfillment. That said, all who met him knew he was special. The grace of God was upon him. As for Mary and me, can you imagine how we felt when we knelt as a family to pray, knowing the Son of God was leading us in praising and talking with his Father.

Lost in the Temple

Every year we travelled to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, the ceremony commemorating the Jews’ escape from slavery in Egypt. The ceremony was family-centered, the meal reenacting the

final meal each family ate before fleeing northwards to the Red Sea and God's miracle through Moses. So we went to Jerusalem as a large family, ourselves, my sons and daughters by my first marriage, their children and Cleopas, my brother, who had his own large family, his wife, several children of various ages and already, some grandchildren. Some of our friends and their families joined our caravan as well – robbers, rebels and the occasional arrogant Roman soldiers were a constant threat to small groups of pilgrims. We had some wagons and donkeys to carry our goods.

There were several boys around Jesus' age and he knew them all very well and they all got along well together and kept each other entertained. We saw little of them during the day as the caravan covered the 80 miles to Jerusalem, a journey taking a little over four days. In the evening we rounded up the boys, lighted camp fires and cooked the evening meal with much hilarity and good humor. Later we sang our prayers to God as a big group. We slept in the open under the stars.

When Jesus was 12 years old, we all went to Jerusalem for the Passover meal as usual. The journey to Jerusalem and the ceremonies passed uneventfully. On the fourth day we packed up, said our goodbyes and set off for Nazareth. As usual, the boys were everywhere, full of good spirits. It was not until our first evening stopover that we looked for Jesus to join us. The minutes passed, then an hour, we started to panic, rushing around, asking if anyone had seen him. They all said no, not today. They helped us search, he was nowhere to be found. We were devastated, we were the parents, the guardians, the carers of God's Son and we had lost Him! What if something bad had happened to Him?

As soon as we had enough light to travel by, we took our donkey and hurried back to Jerusalem. There were still crowds of pilgrims everywhere. It seemed hopeless. We asked everyone who would stop to hear us if they had seen a 12-year old boy, this tall, dressed this way – but everyone was dressed this way! What else could we do? We could not separate, a married woman could not go alone in public, so Mary and I continued the search together. We slept a few fitful hours at our friend's house each night and quickly resumed the search next morning. We continued our desperate search for three full days, praying constantly to God to help us, but He was strangely silent.

On the fourth day, both nearly in tears, we went to the Temple to pray. There was a commotion in the inner court. I was allowed to enter. There was our son, surrounded by priests, scribes and scholars. One of them was explaining a scriptural passage to him, he was replying, amazing them with his understanding and even more by the questions he was asking. I told Mary it was an incredible sight.

Jesus came out to the Women's Court with me, not a care in the world. With tears in her eyes that he was safe, Mary felt like castigating him, but we knew Whose Son He really was, he had never done anything like this before. She merely said,

Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us?

Behold, thy father and I have sought you sorrowing

He gave us a strange answer,

How is it that you sought me?

Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

The Young Man, Jesus

And that was it. Jesus willingly came back to Nazareth with us and we never questioned his obedience, he was a model son. We could only surmise that he was a typical boy passing through puberty and seeking his independence. His divine nature knew God had a mission for Him and in his human nature he wanted to get on with it. But another 18 years would pass before that day would come. He continued his lessons with the rabbi and his insights continued to amaze that poor man, he had no idea who he was dealing with.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

I taught Jesus the carpentry trade and together we made a formidable team. For the next ten years our life was very ordinary. Jesus spent his spare time with his stepbrothers and cousins and their families, helping them with any difficulties that came their way. He often went the few miles to Capernaum where he would watch the fishermen at work and occasionally take a trip with them out onto the Sea of Galilee. He made many friends in both Nazareth and Capernaum and in some of the small villages nearby. One of his friends got in with the wrong crowd and joined in a robbery. The soldiers caught up with his gang and they were imprisoned in the jail at Capernaum. Jesus would visit him and bring him food and talk to him about his wrong decisions. The other prisoners also came to look forward to his visits and the wise counsel of one so young.

He was particularly concerned for the widows and orphans in the surrounding towns and he helped them through many small crises, made sure they had enough food and clothes, fetched water for them from the village well, joined me in doing any repairs or upkeep on their houses and asked either another village woman or Mary to care for them when they were ill. He always made strangers welcome and I was pleased when he invited those in obvious want to join us for our evening meal. Occasionally a Roman soldier would intercept him on the road and demand his right that any Jew should carry his goods a mile for him. Jesus surprised them by carrying the goods an extra mile with a smile on his face. Occasionally he would accompany a shepherd out into the country side and help look after the sheep and goats. If one strayed, he would always volunteer to leave the flocks and go and find the lost animal, he loved the outdoors and helping the lost and those in need.

Later generations will read the prophesied *Judgment of the Nations*. My Mary, our Queen, will sit beside Him on this judgment day, having through the ages taken every opportunity to help each individual person to know and love God - but not everyone will be saved.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him.

And he will separate them one from another,

as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right,

‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father.

Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.’

Then the righteous will answer him and say,

‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?

When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?

When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’

And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (for you did not do such deeds).

And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

At peace, my strength failing, I could write my own epitaph. I’ll use Mary’s words.

My beloved Joseph died peacefully in his sleep. Jesus and I prepared his body for entombment, prayed the burial psalms over his body and tearfully walked in the funeral procession behind the piper and the wailing women to our family tomb. We would miss him terribly on earth but we

knew God had a special place in heaven for the man who had so faithfully and humbly served Him and been a loving human father to His Son and a devoted husband to the virgin mother of His Son. No other man would have accepted without any doubts, constant divine intervention in his life and been required to have undoubting faith in God through the mystery surrounding my pregnancy, the birth of Jesus amid shepherds, angels, kings and prophesying old temple dwellers, the flight into Egypt and the loss of the 12-year-old Jesus for three long days. God had chosen the perfect man to be my husband, to love and cherish me, and to be the protector and provider for my son and myself.