

JOSEPH

THE QUIET HERO

A QUIET MAN IN A REMOTE VILLAGE

'Something unexpected happened. Mary became pregnant, and there seemed no obvious explanation. She was a virtuous girl without any previous hint of scandal, so Joseph was perplexed. There must be a father, but he knew it wasn't him.'

Joseph was a young Jewish man with an extraordinary destiny. He lived in 1st century Palestine and was engaged to marry a girl called Mary. Nothing could have been more normal. They had known each other since childhood, and the matter was arranged in the traditional way by their parents. Both of them were happy with the arrangement, and expected to have an ordinary, pleasant life. Joseph was a builder by trade, which meant he often had to travel to get jobs, but there was plenty of work at the time. King Herod, one of the greatest builders of the ancient world, had built or redesigned many of the cities in his kingdom, so life for people in the building trade was exceptionally good.

MARY IS PREGNANT - BUT NOT TO JOSEPH

But something unexpected happened. Mary became pregnant, and there seemed no obvious explanation. She was a virtuous girl without any previous hint of scandal, so Joseph was perplexed. There must be a father, but he knew it wasn't him. He couldn't marry her of course - the honor of his family was at stake, but he decided to dismiss her as quietly and decently as he could. Then he had an odd experience, something like a dream that settled on his mind and wouldn't go away. The dream told him to ignore common sense and marry her anyway, despite the pregnancy. God was acting through this obscure young woman, unlikely as that seemed, and Joseph was to look after her.

JOSEPH MARRIES MARY

So that was what he did. He married her, despite the outraged objections of his family, and took her into his home. But they did not have sex as any other newly married couple would have done. Something about the dream made Joseph keep his distance.

THE BABY IS BORN

Some months later the baby was born, not at home as Joseph would have wished but in Bethlehem, a little village some miles from Jerusalem. The baby was a boy, and a healthy one, and they called him Jesus.

Several odd things had happened around the time of the baby's birth. Three scholars from the eastern province of Syria had appeared and offered Joseph gifts for his son - quite expensive ones at that. Joseph had been perplexed, but he had enough good common sense to accept the gifts gratefully. Then he had another of those dreams. He became obsessed with the idea that something dreadful was about to happen, and that he had to flee - somewhere far, far away. He tried to reason with himself, but he couldn't shake it off. Mary seemed to take the whole thing in her stride. She apparently believed in dreams too, and suggested they go, and go quickly. To Egypt, no less. So instead of heading home they turned south instead, on the King's Highway with all the other travelers, and moved down into Egypt.

THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

Not long after they left the little village, so they heard, there was some sort of dreadful massacre by Herod's soldiers. The brutes had come by night and without warning killed many of the Bethlehem people, particularly the children, for no apparent reason. The killing itself did not surprise Joseph - Herod had a record of insane violence - he had strangled his own wife and sons. But why Bethlehem? It was just an obscure village of no great importance except in ancient stories.

The massacre spooked Joseph - they had barely missed being killed - and he decided to stay in Egypt for awhile. But eventually Herod died and Joseph figured it was safe to go back.

He didn't like what he heard about Archelaus, Herod's son who now ruled in Judea, so he headed north to Galilee, where it might be safer. They settled in the town of Nazareth. There was a good

Jewish community there, traditional, and that appealed to Joseph's conservative nature. But there was also plenty of work nearby in the town of Sepphoris. It had been largely destroyed in a rebellion a few years back, and was now being rebuilt.

THE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

Joseph had named the boy as his own son, and when it came time for the ceremony of manhood, when Jesus ceased being a child and legally became a man, Joseph took him and Mary to Jerusalem for the ceremony. It was a long journey, but he and Mary had made it many times before and Joseph did not expect any trouble this time.

It was Passover time and the city was crowded, so while they were there Joseph made sure everybody stayed together and did not wander off. It would be terribly easy to get lost in that crowd of people. But everything went smoothly and Joseph congratulated himself on a successful visit as they moved off from the city and set out towards Nazareth.

THE BOY IS LOST

Think of an extremely intelligent twelve-year-old trapped in an isolated villages in the provinces. Each time his family goes to Jerusalem, the boy is taken to the Temple. There he sees the academies set up within the Temple to teach young men. He is excited by what he sees, and wishes he could join the other students... Lost in Jerusalem

He traveled in the men's group of course - men and women traveled separately. He couldn't see Jesus, but then he was probably still walking along with the women and children, as he always had done. At the end of the day when the men's group joined forces with the women and children, he expected to see Jesus. Not so. The boy was nowhere in sight. 'Where is he', he asked Mary. 'I thought he was with you', she responded. 'He's a man now, so I thought he'd be with the men.'

They hunted for him high and low, without any luck. At first light the next morning they headed back to Jerusalem, frantic with worry. A young boy, they thought, alone somewhere in that crowd of strangers. They searched in all the places they'd been, asking all the people they'd had dealings with, but there was nothing, no sign of him. The first day, then a second, terrified, searching, asking, looking. Nothing. Then on the third day Joseph decided to search again in the Temple, in the Men's Court. And there he was, Jesus, sitting calmly with a group of scholars talking to them.

Joseph rushed up to him and grabbed him. 'Where have you been? Where have you been?' He took the boy and dragged him out into the Women's Court where Mary was. 'I've found him' he said. And the boy didn't even seem ruffled. 'Didn't you know I'd be here?' he asked.

Joseph gave the lad a good talking to, then gathered together his little family and headed home, back to Nazareth, back to safety. Now, he thought, with any luck he and Mary and their son could settle down to a quiet, uneventful life.