

What Child Is This? – Joseph Matthew 1:18-25

We have been looking at the Christmas carol, "What Child Is This?" written in 1865 by William Chatterton Dix. The song poses such an important question worth pondering: who this baby in the Bethlehem manger is. It is interesting to note the characters mentioned in the carol such as the Christ child, His mother named Mary, shepherds, angels and even two forms of feeding livestock. While not specifically named, the recognizable actions of the wise men are referenced as the ones who brought their well-known gifts of incense, gold, and myrrh. All the characters normally present in a Nativity display are accounted for and in place except one...Joseph.

There is no mention of the man who would help raise "the babe, the Son of Mary." Everybody else in the Christmas story gets air time or makes a cameo, but not the primary man who would love and invest himself in the life of this special child. We cannot know for sure, but it seems like Joseph would be ok without much (or any!) fanfare in this song. In fact, Mark's gospel gave Joseph the same amount of exposure: zero. Joseph never once is cited or alluded to in the entire gospel of Mark. Although the other gospel writers of Matthew, Luke and John all mention Joseph by name, none of them record him as ever having a speaking part. While a few of Joseph's actions are recorded during the early years of his relationship with Mary and into Jesus' early life, none of Joseph's words remain in print within the pages of the Bible. Only Joseph's actions of obedience, care, and presence are mentioned.

No, Joseph was not present in the song. Joseph's words are not present in the gospel texts. But Joseph quietly was present at the manger. He was present before the manger. He was present after the manger. He was present at least up through Jesus' twelfth birthday as recorded in Luke 2:41-52. Beyond that account, historians believe Joseph died somewhere between Jesus' teenage years and the beginning of his public ministry at age 30. And during the early childhood years of Jesus' life on earth, not only was this child known as the "Son of Mary" as the song states but also Jesus was known as the Son of Joseph.

What child is this? He is a child adopted by a father who loved Him. How do we know Jesus was adopted by Joseph? There are clues all throughout the Bible that do mention Joseph.

There are two places in our Gospel today that gives the reader clues that Joseph, although not the birth father of Jesus, became his adoptive father. The angel of the Lord told Joseph in the dream:

"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.... And he (Joseph) called his name Jesus." Matthew 1:21,25

The naming of a child was the responsibility of the father. The intention of God was for Joseph to adopt Jesus as his son and become his earthly father. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem on that Christmas night, Joseph named the child, his adopted child, Jesus. It was his responsibility as his adoptive father. On the night Jesus was born, Joseph not only gave Jesus His name but also Joseph likely took this newborn baby and symbolically placed Jesus across his knees. Such a symbolic act was the way a first-century husband in biblical days acknowledged the legitimacy of his newborn descendant. Subsequently, for a man to place someone else's child across his knees was a sacred and symbolic act signifying adoption. Although the Bible does not state explicitly that Joseph did this, it is highly probable Joseph not only gave Jesus his name, but also laid Jesus across his knees claiming his legacy and adopting the Son of Mary as his own.

Joseph's wife, Mary, certainly viewed her husband as Jesus's father. When Jesus was a twelve-year-old boy, Joseph and Mary had been to Jerusalem as a family where they celebrated the Feast of Passover. Upon traveling back home, they realized Jesus was not with their traveling group. They rushed back to Jerusalem, where they found Jesus talking with the teachers in the Temple. Notice how Jesus' mother, Mary, responds to Jesus upon finding him, as well as how Luke, the writer of this gospel account, identifies the couple.

"And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.'" Luke 2:48

Luke identified both Mary and Joseph as Jesus' parents. Mary, Jesus' birth mother, calls her husband, Joseph, Jesus' "father." It was clear that Joseph adopted Jesus as his son. It was how Jesus was known in his childhood and even into his adult life. Another clue is given in John's gospel when Jesus calls his disciples to follow him and later into his public ministry.

"The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'" John 1:43-45

Even the Jewish leaders acknowledged Joseph as Jesus' father: "So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" John 6:41-42

Everybody who knew Jesus recognized him as Joseph's son. Joseph had adopted Jesus as his son from day one. What child is this? One of the characteristics that answers the question is found in the reflection of his earthly father, Joseph. This Jesus is the One who adopts us and names us as part of His own family. In our first reading today Paul writes about this characteristic of Jesus who would grow from the baby in the manger to the God that was willing not only to die to rescue His creation, but also to lay all people across His knees to call them as His own as he purchased their freedom from the slavery of sin, death, Satan, and hell.

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." Galatians 4:4-7

What child is this? He is the one who makes adoption into His family possible. And adoption leads to our salvation which includes our freedom from sin. That is what Joseph was told to name his adoptive Son when He would be born. Remember what the angel of the Lord said to Joseph in his dream.

"Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'" Matthew 1:21

The name of Jesus means "God saves." What God saves, God adopts as His own and for His own by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."
Romans 8:14-17

Paul goes on to write about the adoption into God's family in his letter to the Ephesian church.

"[God the Father] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." Ephesians 1:5

After our adoption into the family of God the Father that is made possible by Jesus the Son, in due time Jesus will give us a new name.

The Book of Revelation tells us, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says...I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it." Revelation 2:17

That is adoption language. It includes the responsibility of a father to name his child. What child is this? He is the one who enables adoption into God's family to take place and will give a new name to those who become part of His family. These are the characteristics we see in Jesus' adoptive, earthly father, Joseph. These are the truths and responsibilities of the One we celebrate who was born in a manger so he could die on a cross leading to resurrection and the defeat of sin and death. Such victory and life enables adoption to be available for all who call on His name! This is the ultimate answer to the question: what child is this? He is Jesus, the adopting and naming God who sets us on His knee and calls us sons and daughters. He enables us to be family as He gives us our name. In Jesus, amen.