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Abstract

The reception history of Joseph of Nazareth reveals a complex process whereby the shadowy figure from the canonical gospels slowly emerges as a major saint of western Christianity, and, for Roman Catholics, patron of the universal church. This is reflected in visual art in the contrast between an active, youthful Joseph in post-Tridentine art and an older, more marginal figure more typical in earlier centuries. This article examines an often-neglected thread running through Matthew's Infancy Narrative which has left traces on the visual reception: Joseph as son of Abraham and son of David, the last of the patriarchs standing on the 'top rung' of the genealogical 'ladder'. This motif, which plays on Matthew's ambiguity about Joseph's place in the phases of salvation history, connects three prominent elements in Christian art: Joseph as adopted ancestor who 'gives' Christ his Davidic lineage; the dreams of Joseph, of which the dreams of the patriarch Jacob are a type; Joseph's advanced age, derived from the extra-canonical infancy gospels, which comes to underscore Joseph's patriarchal role, and his similarity to other transitional figures between the older and newer covenants, such as Mary's father Joachim.

1. Joseph: The Emergence of a Saint

Saint Joseph is a major figure for contemporary Roman Catholics, acclaimed since 1870 as patron of the universal church, with two feast days (the main Solemnity of Saint Joseph on 19th March, and the Feast of Saint Joseph the Worker on 1st May), an explicit mention in the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass, and multiple churches and chapels dedicated to him. This prominence of Joseph of Nazareth as a major Christian saint is reflected in visual art of the modern period, where a generally youthful, handsome Joseph appears as part of the holy family, alone with the infant Jesus in an iconography patterning traditional depictions of the Virgin and Child, or labouring in his carpenter's workshop.

This prominence is in marked contrast to Joseph's marginality in the canonical Gospels. He is totally absent from Mark, indirectly referenced in Jesus' title of 'son of Joseph' in the Fourth Gospel (John 1:45; 6:42), and essentially passive in Luke's Infancy Narrative which gives central place to Mary (e.g., Luke 1:27; 2:4, 16). It is only in the Gospel of Matthew that he rises to the level of an active participant, though even here his role is limited to Matthew's Infancy Nar-

rative. Joseph is introduced at the climax to the Matthean genealogy, as descendant of both Abraham and King David, and the one to whom Mary was betrothed (Matt 1:16). His Davidic ancestry is underscored by the angel's address to him as 'son of David' (Matt 1:20), a phrase which will function as an important christological title later in the Gospel (Matt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15). The narrator's characterization of Joseph as 'a righteous man' (*dikaios*, Matt 1:19) probably emphasizes his obedience to the Mosaic law.

This obedience underlies his actions throughout the Infancy Narrative. It is Joseph who takes Mary as his wife and names her child, in obedience to an angelic messenger (Matt 1:21, 24). Similarly, he takes the child and his mother into Egypt, to ensure the continuity of the divine plan (Matt 2:13–14). Finally, it is Joseph who brings Jesus and Mary back from their Egyptian exile after the death of Herod, thereby facilitating a new Exodus (Matt 2:15; cf. Hos 11:1). His work completed, Joseph can now disappear from the story, though the precise terms of his departure are not spelt out.

The paucity of detail in Matthew's characterization of Joseph leaves multiple gaps which the subsequent reception history will attempt to fill. Nothing is said about Joseph's place of birth or hometown (though Bethlehem is implied, Matt 2:1, 11), the details of his life (beyond a later reference to his occupation as *tektōn*, 'carpenter' or 'craftsman,' Matt 13:55), or the circumstances of his death. On the latter point, Raymond Brown's conclusion is probably correct historically: 'Joseph makes no appearance during Jesus' ministry in any Gospel, and it is highly likely that he had died before Jesus' baptism.'¹ Nor is there any indication of Joseph's age at the time of his betrothal to Mary, though cultural convention would have led Matthew's first audiences to expect a young man, perhaps slightly older than his betrothed.

Both the marginality of Joseph, and the gap-filling tendency, are evident in Christian literature, devotion, and liturgy. In the extra-canonical infancy gospels, such as the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, and the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, he emerges as an elderly, reluctant suitor, whose vocation is to protect Mary and preserve her virginity. In early Christian and early medieval art, Joseph appears rarely, outranked by the Virgin and her



Fig. 1: El Greco, *St. Joseph and the Christ Child* (1597–1599, oil on canvas, 289 x 147 cm).

¹ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 519.

Son. His appearance largely occurs in Gospel scenes, such as those depicting his dreams, the adoration of the Magi, and the flight into Egypt, sometimes embellished by the apocryphal texts.² For the most part, the aged figure portrayed in the infancy gospels shapes visual art. A rare exception is the younger Joseph depicted in the upper tier of the triumphal arch in Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, commissioned in 435 by Pope Sixtus III.³

This elderly and rather marginal Joseph will be the norm in visual art into the Renaissance and beyond. The newer prominence given to Joseph as saint, including his more youthful portrayal, is profoundly indebted to theologians of the second millennium: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris (1363–1429), and the Dominic Isidoro de Isolani, whose influential *Summa de Donis Sancti Joseph* was published in 1522. Gerson claimed to have seen German paintings of a young Joseph which challenged convention, and the Joseph in his writings is a compromise, about thirty-six years old at the time of his marriage to Mary, which coincides with Aristotle's prime of life.⁴ Visualizations of Joseph following the Council of Trent increasingly present him as young and handsome, an appropriate model for young celibate clergy. Typical is El Greco's *St. Joseph and the Christ Child*, painted between 1597 and 1599 (Fig. 1).

The long history of Joseph's rise to prominence as a Christian saint and patron of the universal church reflects an ambiguity implicit in the Gospel of Matthew: does he belong to the older covenant, like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna in Luke's Gospel, or to the new? His disappearance from the story prior to Jesus' public ministry favours the former explanation, as does his linkage to Israel's patriarchs in the Matthean genealogy. This ambiguity has left its mark in Christian liturgy. In the Byzantine tradition, where liturgical commemoration of Joseph began earlier than in the West, he was originally celebrated along with a long line of Christ's ancestors, beginning with Adam, on the Sunday before Christmas, the 'Sunday of the Holy Fathers.' Subsequently, Joseph came to be commemorated separately on the Sunday after Christmas, along with his ancestor David, and eventually also James the Lord's brother, regarded as Joseph's son from an earlier marriage. This was essentially 'a prolongation of the solemnities of Christmas', recalling Joseph's role in the mystery of the Incarnation.⁵ The Kontakion for this feast presents all three as worshipers of Christ, and sharing crowns by virtue of being his kin:

² Schiller, *Iconography*, 56–58, 117–124.

³ For a recent discussion, see: <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2020/11/11/visual-representations-of-early-marian-apocryphal-texts-some-notes-on-the-top-register-of-the-triumpal-arch-at-santa-maria-maggiore>.

⁴ Chorpenning, *St. Joseph as Guardian Angel*, 104; McGuire, *Becoming a Father*, 52–57.

⁵ Filas, *Joseph: The Man Closest to Jesus*, 484.

Godly David on this day is filled with gladness of spirit; Joseph also joineth James in offering glory and praises. They rejoice, for as Christ's kinsmen, they have received crowns: and they praise the One ineffably born upon earth as they cry out with a great voice: O Lord of mercy, save them that honour Thy Name.⁶

Even in the West, medieval proponents of an enhanced cult for Joseph recognize his transitional location at the dawning of the messianic age. Saint Bernardine of Siena (1380–1444) offers the following explanation for Joseph's lack of a feast day in the western church: 'He went down in Limbo and belongs to the Old Testament.'⁷ For Bernardine, Joseph is the last and greatest of the patriarchs.⁸ Although a commemoration of Saint Joseph on 19th March is found in several medieval western calendars, it would only be declared a universal feast of the Roman rite by Pope Pius V in 1570.

Treatments of Joseph's portrayal in visual art often focus on his reception of dreams, his advanced age, or the increasing emphasis, especially in western art, on Joseph's role as protector of Christ and Mary and provider of their physical needs, summed up in the medieval title *nutritor Domini*. Focus here is on that neglected thread connecting several of these motifs, which views Joseph as the bridge between the older and newer covenants, and specifically how Joseph as the last of Israel's patriarchs has left diverse traces on his visual reception.⁹

2. Joseph in the Genealogy

The two Gospel genealogies, for all their differences, trace the ancestry of Christ through Saint Joseph (Matt 1:2–17; Luke 3:23–38), thus placing the latter in the patriarchal line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as well as the royal line of David.¹⁰ Both royal and patriarchal dimensions of Christ's ancestry are manifest, to varying degrees, in visual art. Perhaps the most famous visual interpretation of Matthew's genealogy is the Tree of Jesse, found in a wide variety of media including frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, and stained glass between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. This combines the Matthean passage with Isaiah's prophecy concerning the shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:1–2).¹¹

Surprisingly, Joseph is rarely present in Jesse Trees, which tend to select a limited number of ancestors in the tree growing out of the body of Jesse, lying on his side. David and Solomon are constant figures, and the Virgin, also be-

⁶ Holy Transfiguration Monastery, trans., *The Great Horologion*, 359.

⁷ Richardson, *St Joseph, St Peter, Jean Gerson and the Guelphs*, 264.

⁸ Filas, *Joseph: The Man Closest to Jesus*, 386–387.

⁹ On Joseph as patriarch, see Filas, *Joseph: The Man Closest to Jesus*, 435–438.

¹⁰ On patristic attempts to reconcile the discrepancies between the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, see Boxall, *Matthew Through the Centuries*, 42–45.

¹¹ Schiller, *Iconography*, 15–22; Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel*, 74–80.

lieved to be descended from David, is generally placed near the top of the tree, either immediately below Christ, or enthroned with her Son on her lap. This connection with Mary was already established by Tertullian (*De carne Christi* 20–22), who noted the similarity between the ‘rod’ (*virga*) in his Latin text of Isaiah 11 and ‘virgin’ (*virgo*). Mary is the ‘rod’, and Christ the ‘flower’ ascending from Jesse’s root. One of the earliest examples, the thirteenth-century Jesse window in Chartres Cathedral, has four kings, the first two almost certainly David and Solomon, though lacking distinguishing features. The royal ancestors are flanked by a series of prophets, reflecting Matthew’s parallel interest in fulfilment of biblical prophecy (e.g., Matt 1:22–23; 2:5–6, 15, 17–18, 23).¹² That Joseph is simply subsumed into his predecessors in the Chartres window underscores his belonging to the period of preparation.



Fig. 2: *Gallery of Kings*, west façade, Notre Dame, Paris (figures: 19th century restoration).

There are exceptions, in which Joseph is depicted either implicitly or explicitly, highlighting his specific role as last of the patriarchs and precursor of Christ as Davidic king. The west façade of Notre Dame in Paris includes a gallery of twenty-eight kings of Judah (Fig. 2), the number of monarchs from David to Joseph inclusive in Matthew’s genealogy.¹³ This reflects a major interest among medieval theologians in Joseph’s lineage, and hence the necessity of Mary’s marriage to Joseph to ensure Christ’s Davidic descent (e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux; Rupert of Deutz; Peter John Olivi). In the large and complex Tree of Jesse fresco on the exterior of the monastic church at Voroneț, Moldova, Romania,

¹² Johnson, *Tree of Jesse Window*, 1–2.

¹³ Schiller, *Iconography*, 14.

Joseph and John the Baptist flank Christ, just above the Virgin at the top of the tree.¹⁴

But Joseph's connection to the patriarchal and Davidic genealogy is also depicted more obliquely. In the Nativity scene on the right tympanum of the west front of Chartres Cathedral, Joseph wears a distinctive cap, thought to reflect the headdress worn by Jews in the Middle Ages.¹⁵ The Moses figure in the central panel of Nicolas Froment's 1476 *Burning Bush* triptych, witnessing the Virgin Mary as the burning bush, has been plausibly identified as Joseph in Mosaic guise (Fig. 3). This panel would then depict Joseph's first dream persuading him to take Mary as his wife (Matt 1:18–25), an interpretation supported by the presence of an angel to the left. It is through Joseph's obedience to the angel, including giving Jesus his name, that he bestows on Christ his Davidic ancestry. The Froment panel is surrounded by twelve of Joseph's royal ancestors, beginning with David in the lower left, the twelfth closest to the figure of Joseph in the lower right.¹⁶



Fig. 3: Nicolas Froment, *The Burning Bush* (1476, oil on wood, 410 x 305 cm).

A similar point is made by the iconographical resemblance between Joseph and Jesse in the predella panel of the Nativity in Giovanni Bellini's *Coronation of the Virgin*, painted for the high altar of San Francesco, Pesaro, in the early 1470s. Like Jesse in traditional depictions of the Jesse Tree, Joseph is asleep, seated on the stump of a prominent fig tree, a symbol of Israel in Hos 9:10. Carolyn Wilson offers the following vivid description:

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vorone%C8%9B_Monastery.

¹⁵ Marriage, *The Sculptures of Chartres Cathedral*, 50–51.

¹⁶ Minott, *A Note on Nicolas Froment's 'Burning Bush Triptych'*; Nishino, *Le Triptyche du Bois-son ardent*.

Here, the line of the fig tree in the predella panel descends through Joseph's left arm to the staff placed between his legs and through it to the plateau on which the Child lies, thus again providing a visual metaphor for Joseph's surrogate paternity and his Davidic role in the ancestry of Christ.¹⁷

Another indirect allusion to Joseph's crucial place in the Davidic line appears in Master Bertram's fourteenth-century *Grabower Altar* or *Petri-Altar*. This impressive polyptych combines painted panels on the wings with sculptured statues surrounding a crucifixion scene in the interior. The painted panels are in two rows, the majority of them scenes from Genesis from the creation through to Isaac's blessing of Jacob. These are followed by six Gospel scenes in the lower right, from the annunciation to Mary to the flight into Egypt. The arrangement means that the scenes depicting Eve are directly above those from the Gospel, reflecting the common Eve-Mary typology. The relevant panel is that of the Nativity (Fig. 4), in which Joseph is depicted handing Jesus to Mary, a motif which is replicated in some later paintings, such as Jacopo Pontormo's 1518 *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Sts. Joseph, John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, Francis, and James* (Fig. 5). In the Master Bertram image, Joseph is simultaneously supporting the collapsing roof of the stable with his shoulders.



Fig. 4: Nativity panel from Master Bertram of Hamburg, *Grabower Altar* (1375–1383, paint on panel, 80 x 57 cm).



Fig. 5: Jacopo Pontormo, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Sts. Joseph, John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, Francis, and James* (1518, oil on panel, 214 cm x 185 cm).

¹⁷ Wilson, *St. Joseph*, 32–33.

Sheila Schwartz has argued that both motifs signify Joseph bestowing on Jesus Davidic descent. The latter is a symbol of the old order associated with the fallen hut of David, which according to the prophet Amos would be rebuilt in the messianic age (Amos 9:11; cf. Acts 15:16–17).¹⁸ Thus Master Bertram has powerfully visualized a Joseph on whose shoulders ‘the prophetic weight of the House of David comes to rest.’¹⁹ His patriarchal role is further enhanced by his resemblance to both Noah and Isaac as depicted in the Old Testament panels of the altarpiece.²⁰

In Dosso Dossi’s *The Holy Family*, painted c. 1527–1528 (Fig. 6), Joseph handing Jesus to Mary is combined with another visual motif signifying his crucial location in the Abrahamic and Davidic genealogy. Joseph stands awkwardly, his left foot on the pavement and his right on the first of a series of steps. Mary’s left foot is on the first step, while her right is on the next step above.²¹ The visual motif of the ladder or staircase, indicating Joseph’s role as patriarch of the line of David, is indebted to the Benedictine theologian Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075/1080 – c. 1129). In several of his exegetical writings, Rupert describes Joseph as the top rung of the genealogical ladder, as in his commentary on the Gospel of John:



Fig. 6: Dosso Dossi, *The Holy Family* (c. 1527–1528, oil on canvas, 236 x 171 cm).

Born as a little child in this world, namely, without a father in the flesh, the Lord made use of that blessed man as His father in every way; and in the genealogy (*in illa generationis scala*) which Matthew follows out, He rested on St. Joseph as if on the top rung of a ladder (*tanquam gradui supremae*), for every need of His humanity.²²

The relevant passage in John is Christ’s response to Nathanael, which alludes to the patriarch Jacob’s vision of a ladder (John 1:50–51; cf. Gen 28:10–

¹⁸ Schwartz, *Iconography of the Rest*, 47; Schwartz, *St. Joseph in Meister Bertram’s Petri-Altar*, 148–150; Wilson, *St. Joseph*, 30–31.

¹⁹ Schwartz, *St. Joseph in Meister Bertram’s Petri-Altar*, 150.

²⁰ Dube, *The Grabow Altar*, 97.

²¹ Wilson, *St. Joseph*, 56–58.

²² Filas, *St. Joseph in the Writings of Rupert of Deutz*, 273–274. PL 169: 271.

17). Rupert repeats the genealogical interpretation of the ladder in his commentary on Genesis (*In Gen. 7:22*).²³ Finally, in his commentary on Matthew, Rupert draws a particular link between the three principal figures in the Matthean genealogy, Abraham, David, and Joseph, all recipients of a promise, Joseph being the top rung of the ladder (*supremus scalae gradus*).²⁴ Rupert seems to regard Joseph as ‘a sort of unique patriarch of the Old Covenant,’ whose closeness to Mary and Jesus also enabled him to be viewed as Christian saint.²⁵ In the words of Joseph Seitz, ‘er ist das letzte, würdige Glied in der erhabensten Ahnenreihe der Welt.’²⁶

The staircase motif is more prominent in an extraordinary tondo painted c. 1494/1505 by the Florentine Renaissance artist Piero di Cosimo, *The Nativity with the Infant Saint John* (Fig. 7). At the centre, the Virgin adores the infant Jesus, his head resting on a bale of wheat, symbolizing the Eucharist. Mary is flanked by the infant John the Baptist and an angel. In the background, the elderly Joseph descends a staircase, within a ruined building partly resembling a stable, potentially symbolizing the house of David. That he is now slowly descending the staircase suggests that his role of conveying Davidic ancestry on the Christ child is now completed.²⁷



Fig. 7: Piero di Cosimo, *The Nativity with the Infant Saint John* (c. 1495/1505, oil on canvas, diameter 145.7 cm).

3. Joseph the Patriarchal Dreamer

Central to Matthew’s portrayal of Joseph are his revelatory dreams (Matt 1:20–21; 2:13, 19–20, 22), which drive the action of the Infancy Narrative and ensure his role as protector of the holy family. Depictions of Joseph’s dreams in art occur as early as the fourth century, as in a sarcophagus from Arles, presenting

²³ PL 167: 467.

²⁴ PL 168: 1317.

²⁵ Filas, *St. Joseph in the Writings of Rupert of Deutz*, 275.

²⁶ Seitz, *Die Verehrung des heiligen Joseph*, 3.

²⁷ Wilson, *St. Joseph*, 58.

the first dream in which the angel announces Mary's pregnancy to Joseph.²⁸ The top tier of the triumphal arch in Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, is generally interpreted as depicting two of Joseph's dreams. The first, on the left side on the upper register, parallels the annunciation to Mary with Joseph's annunciation in his first dream. Unusually, Joseph is standing alert with eyes open, holding the rod by which he is identified as Mary's chosen spouse in the *Protevangelium of James* (Fig. 8). The second, on the far right of the upper register, presents a sleeping Joseph, being warned by the angel to flee to Egypt (Fig. 9).²⁹ In both, Joseph is a youthful figure, unusual in the artistic tradition until the post-Tridentine period. Other famous examples, from after Trent, include Philippe de Champaigne's *The Dream of Saint Joseph* (1642–43, oil on canvas, 209.5 x 155.8 cm, National Gallery, London).³⁰ The presence of Mary to the right of the young Joseph, and the absence of the child Jesus, identifies this as the first dream.



Fig. 8: *First dream of Joseph*, far right of top left register of triumphal arch, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (432–440, mosaic).



Fig. 9: *Second dream of Joseph*, far right of top right register of triumphal arch, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (432–440, mosaic).

Nor is the sleeping Joseph restricted to depictions of the Matthean dream scenes. He is often shown asleep in paintings of the Nativity, as in the fifteenth-century example from the workshop of the Florentine Carmelite artist Fra Filippo Lippi, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (Fig. 10). Joseph sleeps, head in hand, to the left of the infant Christ. Art historians have often viewed such depictions negatively, as an indication of Joseph's senility, paralleling his rather comic portrayal as a bumbling cuckold found in medieval mystery plays. However, they should be understood more positively, as emphasizing Joseph's ongoing receptivity to divine revelation.³¹ A much later Carmelite, Jerónimo

²⁸ Seitz, *Die Verehrung des heiligen Joseph*, 71–72; Jacobs, *Joseph the Carpenter*, 162–174; see also Schiller, *Iconography*, 56–58, 117–124.

²⁹ For an alternative interpretation of the left hand register as depicting annunciations to Abraham and Sarah, see Spain, *The Promised Blessing*, 535–540.

³⁰ <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/philippe-de-champaigne-the-dream-of-saint-joseph>.

³¹ Wilson, *St. Joseph*, 35.

Gracián de la Madre de Dios, in his 1597 *Summary of the Excellencies of St. Joseph, Husband of Mary*, will connect Joseph's continual dreaming with his being in a constant state of contemplation, specifically the 'contemplation in action' advocated by Jerónimo's associate Teresa of Ávila.³²



Fig. 10: Fra Filippo Lippi and workshop, *The Nativity* (probably c. 1445, oil and tempera on panel, 23.2 x 55.3 cm).

The motif of Joseph the dreamer is another indicator of his status as the last of the patriarchs. Connections are frequently made in the exegetical tradition between Joseph's dreams and those of his biblical forebears. For many modern scholars, the dreams of Joseph recall those of his Old Testament namesake (Gen 37:4–11). That Matthew's genealogy names Joseph's father as Jacob (Matt 1:16) sets up a potential typological relationship with the patriarch Joseph, favoured son of Jacob/Israel. This view is already expressed in 1889 by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical on devotion to St Joseph, *Quamquam pluries*:

You well understand, Venerable Brethren, that these considerations are confirmed by the opinion held by a large number of the Fathers, to which the sacred liturgy gives its sanction, that the Joseph of ancient times, son of the patriarch Jacob, was the type of St. Joseph, and the former by his glory prefigured the greatness of the future guardian of the Holy Family (*Quamquam pluries* 4).³³

Leo does not specify which Fathers he has in mind, though he is using the term more loosely, to refer to medieval rather than patristic authors (though see e.g., Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* 146).³⁴ The Joseph-Joseph typology is most famously proposed by Bernard of Clairvaux:

The first Joseph, sold by jealous brothers and led off to Egypt, prefigured the selling of Christ. The second Joseph, fleeing jealous Herod, carried Christ away into Egypt. The first, keeping faith with the master, refused to couple with his mistress. The second, recognizing that his lady, the mother of the Lord, was a virgin, watched over her in faithful continence (*In laudibus Virginis Mariae* 2.16).³⁵

³² Chorpensing, *St. Joseph as Guardian Angel*, 120–121.

³³ https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15081889_quamquam-pluries.html.

³⁴ PL 52: 592C-593C.

³⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Homilies*, 28–29.

In the earlier patristic period, by contrast, the Old Testament Joseph is more frequently regarded as a type of Christ, especially in his passion (e.g., Justin, *Dial.* 91; Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 10; *Marc.* 3.18; Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 15.5; Ambrose, *Jos.* 14). This christological connection is also present in medieval art, as on the west portal of the north transept façade of Chartres Cathedral, where thirteenth-century sculptures of Jesus son of Sirach, Judith, and Joseph are depicted as types of Christ and Mary.

A better fit for the New Testament Joseph, whose dreams require no complex interpretation, is the patriarch Jacob. There is a particularly striking parallel between Jacob's auditory dream which persuades him to depart for Egypt (Gen 46:1–4), and Joseph's second dream. The Jacob-Joseph connection was already made by Origen (*Adnotationes in Genesim* 37:10). In the ninth century, the Benedictine theologian Rabanus Maurus makes an explicit link between Joseph's dreams and Jacob's dream at Bethel, where Jacob saw a ladder stretching from heaven to earth (*Expositio in Matthaeum* 1, 44, referencing Gen 28:10–19). Nor are the Jacob-Joseph and Joseph-Joseph typologies necessarily considered mutually exclusive. The antiphon from a Carmelite Office of the fifteenth century likens Joseph to both Jacob and Joseph, as well as to Noah, Moses and Aaron.³⁶ Here Joseph's love for Mary is compared to Jacob's for Rachel (Gen 29:1–30).

The Jacob-Joseph typology may shed additional light on Piero di Cosimo's *Nativity with the Infant Saint John* (see Fig. 7). The top of the staircase on which Joseph stands is open to the heavens. A prominent angel, presumably Matthew's 'angel of the Lord' (Matt 1:20), stands on the landing, with two further angels hovering nearby. The scene recalls Jacob's ladder, connecting heaven and earth, on which angels ascend and descend. The promise given to Jacob in that dream is that 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring' (Gen 28:14 NRSV). That promise is now being fulfilled in the child at the bottom of Piero's tondo, the adopted offspring of Joseph, descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

A seventeenth-century example is Rembrandt's 1654 etching *The Circumcision in the Stable* (Fig. 11). The ladder to the far left may serve the dual purpose of prefiguring Christ's passion,



Fig. 11: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Circumcision in the Stable* (1654, etching on laid paper, 11 x 15.8 cm).

³⁶ Seitz, *Die Verehrung des heiligen Joseph*, 43.

as the ladder used to remove Christ's body from the cross, and recalling Jacob's dream, heaven and earth now connected in the coming of the Messiah.³⁷

4. Joseph's Age

A final allusion to Joseph as last of the patriarchs may be present in the focus on his advanced age, which as we have seen dominates the artistic tradition, as it does Joseph's portrayal in medieval drama and hymnody. The popular medieval Cherry Tree Carol sums it up succinctly: 'Joseph was an old man, and an old man was he. He married sweet Mary, the Queen of Galilee.' The triumphal arch in Santa Maria Maggiore is something of an outlier in its depiction of a more youthful Joseph. More typical is the aged protector of the young Virgin encountered above, e.g., in Piero di Cosimo's Joseph cautiously descending the staircase, or the aged man handing the baby Jesus to his mother in Master Bertram's *Grabower Altar*. An older Joseph is also typical in Byzantine iconography of the Nativity from the sixth century onwards. A fifteenth-century example is Andrei Rublev's icon in Moscow's Annunciation Cathedral (Fig. 12).

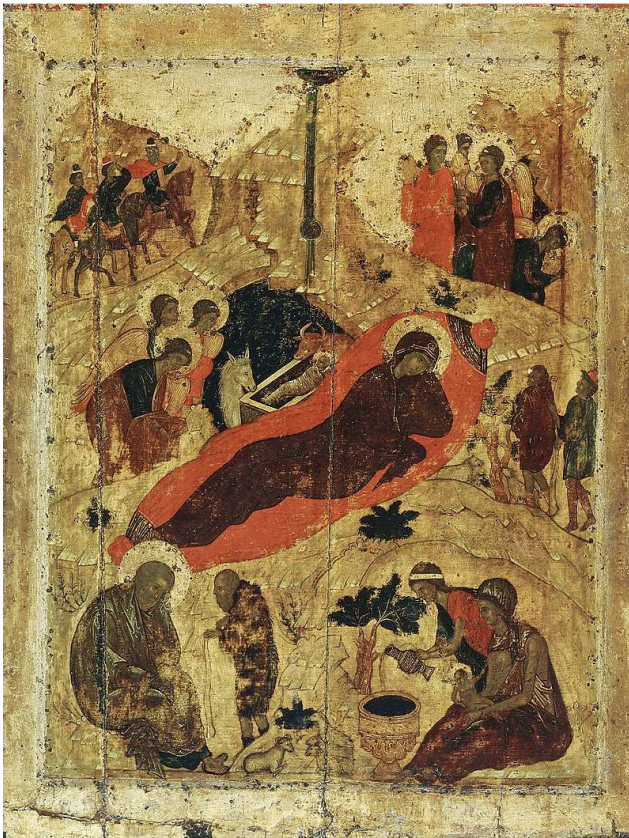


Fig. 12: Andrei Rublev, *The Nativity of the Lord* (15th century, tempera on panel, 81 x 62 cm).

A fifteenth-century example is Andrei Rublev's icon in Moscow's Annunciation Cathedral (Fig. 12). In the West, this visual tradition continues into the sixteenth century, as in a German engraving from c. 1500 depicting Joseph with the Christ Child (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13: German artist, *Joseph and the Christ Child* (c. 1500, engraving, hand-colored in red and green).

³⁷ Silver, Rembrandt's Protestant Joseph, 188–189, 209, n. 37.

The original purpose of this emphasis on Joseph's advanced age, first attested in the late-second-century *Protevangelium of James*, was almost certainly to protect the developing doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity. In the *Protevangelium*, Joseph emerges as an elderly widower and reluctant suitor, chosen by the high priest as Mary's guardian and protector (Prot. Jas. 9:1–2). Later extra-canonical texts elaborate on this motif. In the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, Joseph is already a grandfather, with sons older than the fourteen year-old Mary (Ps.-Mt. 8:4). The Coptic *History of Joseph the Carpenter* claims that Joseph was 90 at the time of his betrothal to Mary (Hist. Jos. Carp. 14:4–5). This seventh-century text is believed to have been instrumental in promoting a feast of Joseph in the seventh-century Egyptian church, the earliest such feast in the Christian world.³⁸

However, whilst its origins may lie in Marian doctrine, there are indications that the motif of an aged Joseph came to function rather differently, as a statement about Joseph's own patriarchal role. In the Coptic tradition, Joseph dies at 111 (Hist. Jos. Carp. 10; 15:1), a year beyond what Geoffrey Parrinder has described as 'the ideal age for the close of life in Egypt.'³⁹ Western medieval poetry has Joseph live until the age of 120, the same age as Moses (Deut 34:7), or even as old as 200, exceeding the great patriarch Abraham by a quarter of a century, Isaac by 20 years, and Jacob by 53 (Gen 25:7; 35:28; 47:28).⁴⁰ If Joseph is to be ranked amongst Christ's patriarchal ancestors, it is fitting that he parallels or even exceeds them in longevity.

In art, Joseph's connection to the time of preparation in the older covenant is also evident in his visual similarity to other aged figures who bridge the old and the new, notably Luke's Zechariah and Elizabeth or Simeon and Anna (Luke 1:5–25, 39–45; 2:25–38), or the apocryphal parents of Mary, Joachim and Anna. In Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, there is a particularly striking resemblance between Joseph and Mary's father Joachim. Both are bearded, with short grey hair. Both are depicted as dreamers. On the top tier of the south



Fig. 14: Giotto di Bondone, *Joachim's Dream* (1303–1307, fresco, 200 x 185 cm).

³⁸ Giamberardini, *Saint Joseph dans la tradition copte*.

³⁹ Parrinder, *Son of Joseph*, 114.

⁴⁰ Filas, *The Man Nearest to Christ*, 22.

wall, Giotto has recreated the apocryphal scene in which an angel of the Lord announces the birth of Mary to Joachim while he was out in the fields tending his flocks, accompanied by other shepherds (Prot. Jas. 4:2–3; Fig. 14). Among the scenes in the middle tier is the Nativity of Christ, in which a sleeping Joseph is positioned near the adoring shepherds of Bethlehem with their sheep (Fig. 15). Both Joseph and Joachim stand in that transitional phase when the arrival of Israel's anticipated salvation is now announced through angelic visitation and revelatory dream.



Fig. 15: Giotto di Bondone, *The Nativity of Christ* (1303–1307, fresco, 200 x 185 cm).

5. Conclusion

The canonical sources provide only a skeletal outline for the story of Joseph, which the subsequent reception history fills out in often surprising ways, in response to cultural changes and specific theological perspectives. Within the rich complex of Joseph's 'afterlives', Matthew's Infancy Narrative, with its ambiguity concerning Joseph's precise location within the phases of salvation history, continues to play a significant role. This article has focused on a specific thread—Joseph as last of the patriarchs and key link in the Davidic line—within the visual reception, a thread which is arguably downplayed in consideration of Joseph's role. This is especially the case in the Catholic tradition since the Council of Trent, which has prioritized Joseph's role as Christian saint and, more recently, patron of the universal church.

In interesting and sometimes tangential ways, the motif of Joseph the patriarch can be shown to connect several dimensions of his portrayal in Christian art: his crucial place in the genealogy, as the top 'rung' of the ladder according to Rupert of Deutz's exegesis; his famous dreams, modelling patriarchal ancestors such as Joseph and especially Jacob; the extra-canonical interest in Joseph's advanced age, and his visual resemblance to other characters firmly associated with the period of preparation for Christ's coming. Originally emerging as support for the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, the motif of an elderly Joseph is a prime example of how meanings can develop in response to new circumstances, enabling distinct motifs and images to come together to form new patterns of significance.

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