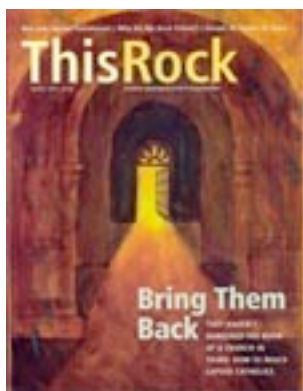


Was Joseph the “father” of Jesus?

“Joseph was possibly the biological father of Jesus, but the Gospels deny the fact, claiming he was the product of a virgin birth, making Jesus more than just a man.”

“Jesus is really the product of rape and Joseph mercifully stepped up to the plate to help Mary and the unfortunate baby.”

“Joseph was not the father of Jesus because Jesus had no biological father; he was born to the Virgin Mary by the miraculously overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.”



There is more than one opinion today on Joseph’s relationship to Jesus—but what is the truth? Is it theologically and historically correct to refer to Joseph as the father of Jesus? In front of the tomb of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem I state in my video/ DVD *Jesus, the Word Became Flesh*,

“The earth provided a borrowed cave in Bethlehem to receive him at his birth and now another borrowed cave in Jerusalem protects his body in death. Born from a virgin womb he was now buried in a virgin tomb. *His father Joseph* found the cave for this birth, a disciple Joseph found a cave for his burial” (the words in

question are *italicized*).

But is it proper to refer to Joseph as “the father of Jesus”? The answer is both *yes* and *no*. First, I will address the *No*. Modern times has spawned some theologians that have argued against the truth of the Scriptures and have contended that the gospels do not communicate the historical truth of Jesus, but only pass on the wishful thinking of early Christians. The claims made by the Bible and accepted in the early Church are now questioned by many skeptics and the Virgin Birth of Jesus is often denied in modern theological circles.

These “modern” theologians and writers consider themselves “progressive.” They have bought into the secular mindset which can’t accept miracles thinking that our materialistic universe is controlled by natural laws alone. They believe that miracles do not happen because God, if he really exists, is not involved in the real world. They believe and teach that truth can only be ascertained by the five senses.

Many writers and theologians have attempted to “rethink” the birth of Christ, usually attempting to break the chains of “fundamentalism” and escape to what they consider the rational, modern view of reality. These theologians and writers think the early Christians buried the truth and promoted a position of “faith” cut loose from reason and history.

Two recent examples are John Shelby Spong and A. N. Wilson. Both men are skeptics, denying—or at least questioning—much of what the Gospels teach about Our Lord. To avoid the supernatural conclusions of the New Testament, Spong in his book *Born of a Woman*, stoops so low as to cynically speculate that Mary was a teenager who bore a child conceived by rape and was later taken under Joseph’s wing.

In his popular book *Jesus: the Evidence* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), A. N. Wilson, with a condescending and skeptical tone, discusses the birth of Jesus. He dismissively says that in his gospel Matthew “tries to justify Jesus’ apparent divine origin” (46).

In his book *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), Luke Timothy Johnson gives a sarcastic response to such skepticism. He writes,

“They conceive of their chore in therapeutic terms. They seek to help those still enthralled by faith to find their way to the condition of enlightenment enjoyed by the authors. Each writer also follows the predictable path of rationalist reduction. Historical difficulties in the texts as we have them are construed as hopeless obstacles, which must lead inevitably to skepticism. The void of skepticism is then filled with inventive speculation. The speculation is not a reasonable alternative reading based on the available evidence, but a complete reshuffling of the pieces, yielding a picture more satisfying to the aesthetic or religious sensibilities of the authors” (32).

Unhappily, even Catholic theologian Raymond E. Brown concludes his discussion of the virginal birth of Jesus by saying “I came to the conclusion that the *scientifically controllable* biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved” (*The Birth of the Messiah* [New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993], 527).

(I have vigorously opposed such a view in our DVD series. The very title of our series is *The Footprints of God* which is intended to proclaim that God is intimately involved in human history and quite willing and ready to walk among us and perform miracles — actions outside the bounds of the physical laws of nature.)

Is it feasible and possible that a child could be born of a virgin without the sexual involvement of a male? Secularists and skeptics are forced to say “no” since they deny, or at least question the supernatural. But those who have a more holistic view of the universe understand that if a Creator can create a universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), then he can certainly intervene in the natural laws he has established and override them on as he wills. This is what a miracle is, the intervention of God within the laws of nature which he himself established. And the Church from the beginning of her existence has firmly and unshakably held to the virginal birth of Christ. The importance and universal acceptance of this truth is emphasized by its enshrinement in the primary Creeds of the Church. For example, the Nicene Creed states: “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man.”

For the crowd of skeptics, referring to Joseph as the “father of Jesus” would certainly suggest Joseph’s natural, biological fatherhood of Jesus. Even in the Church today, too many even in the Church have succumbed to the anti-supernatural sentiments of our culture and might misunderstand the words to mean Jesus was the result of the sexual relations between a man and a women, namely Joseph and Mary. The uncatechized or those infiltrated by the secular worldview might take the phrase “father of Jesus” as an

implicit denial of the Virgin Birth of Our Lord. *Surely* Jesus could not have been born of a virgin without the involvement of a man—it is against nature, impossible. Unhappily this perspective is a modern phenomenon, a phenomenon birthed in a secular, materialistic world.

So, in the modern theological climate, referring to Joseph as the father of Jesus requires that we provide a clear explanation of what we mean by that phrase. As Scripture and tradition inform us, Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus because Jesus was born of a virgin without the participation of a man. Joseph is the father of Jesus through adoption, by the choice of God, and by marriage to Mary. The Scripture and the earliest tradition of the Christian faith are clear. Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' birth and afterwards, and Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary without sexual relations. As such, Joseph was the foster father of Jesus, the legal, adoptive father of our Lord—the chosen father, specially chosen by God himself (CCC 532).

But with all of this understood, and with our theological bases covered so as not to give comfort to the secularists and skeptics, we still must ask, is it biblically and theologically correct to refer to Joseph as the “father of Jesus”? Now we address the *Yes* part of our answer.

As Christians we believe that God created the world and can powerfully and really intervene in the natural laws he has put in place. He created the universe from nothing and created man from the dust of the earth. He is certainly able to perform a miracle and bring about the birth of his son through a virgin.

I would like to refer to 1) two passages from Luke's Gospel; 2) St. Aquinas and his quotation from St. Augustine in the *Summa Theologica*, and 3) John Paul II's *Guardian of the Redeemer*. In my documentary on Jesus I use the word “father” (regarding Joseph), in the same manner as these respected authorities. I will refer to these respected authorities to argue that it is correct, within the proper context, to refer to Joseph as the father of Jesus.

The Scriptural precedent first:

First, When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised, Luke informs us “*And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him* (Lk 2:33 RSV, Catholic Edition). St. Luke does not suppose it necessary to add the words adoptive, foster, or legal. He simply refers to Joseph as “his father”. Luke had already explained the virgin birth but now under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—the one who had overshadowed Mary at the Annunciation—Luke refers to Joseph as the *father* of Jesus.

Second, when Mary and Joseph turned back to Jerusalem looking for Jesus in the Temple where they found him questioning the Doctors of the Law, Mary asked, “*Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously*” (Lk 2:48).

It is certain here that Mary is using “father” to refer to Joseph and not the Heavenly Father. John Paul II commented, “even the Virgin Mary, well aware that she has not

conceived Christ as a result of conjugal relations with Joseph, still calls him Christ's father." So based on this scriptural precedent alone we are on solid ground. Not only does Mary refer to Joseph as Jesus' father, but also, as St. Augustine mentions, she shows great respect for husband and the title of *father* by putting him first "Your father and I."

St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas

In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas writes, "Or, according to Augustine (*De Consensu Evangelistarum* ii), Joseph is called the father of Christ just as 'he is called the husband of Mary, without fleshly mingling, by the mere bond of marriage: being thereby united to Him much more closely than if he were adopted from another family. Consequently that Christ was not begotten of Joseph by fleshly union is no reason why Joseph should not be called His father; since he would be the father even of an adopted son not born of his wife'" (Question 28, Art. 1, Reply OBJ 1).

St. Augustine, quoted by St. Thomas, says there is no reason Joseph should not be called Jesus' father. Even an adoptive father has the right and be called the father of his adopted son, how much more so in this case since Jesus was the real son of his mother and under the fatherhood of Joseph her legal spouse.

John Paul II (*Guardian of the Redeemer*)

Even though there is a scandal in our modern times, with those who deny the Virgin Birth, that is no reason to deny Joseph his proper place and title, that of father. Our proper designation of Joseph as father of Jesus should give no hint of support to heretics, especially if we are clear in what we mean by the title.

The historical teaching of the Church and even the Scripture make it clear. The designation *father* certainly conforms to the teaching of the Church. I think this quote from John Paul II in *Guardian of the Redeemer*, 7 is pertinent. I am especially interested in points I have italicized. Here is what the document says,

"And while it is important for the Church to profess the virginal conception of Jesus, it is no less important to uphold Mary's marriage to Joseph, because juridically Joseph's fatherhood depends on it. Thus one understands why the generations are listed according to the genealogy of Joseph: 'Why,' St. Augustine asks, 'should they not be according to Joseph? Was he not Mary's husband? ... Scripture states, through the authority of an angel, that he was her husband. Do not fear, says the angel, to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was told to name the child, although not born from his seed. She will bear a son, the angel says, and you will call him Jesus. Scripture recognizes that Jesus is not born of Joseph's seed, since in his concern about the origin of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph is told that it is of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, he is not deprived of his fatherly authority from the moment that he is told to name the child. Finally, even the Virgin Mary, well aware that she has not conceived Christ as a result of conjugal relations with Joseph, still calls him Christ's father?'"

“The Son of Mary is also Joseph’s Son by virtue of the marriage bond that unites them: ‘By reason of their faithful marriage both of them deserve to be called Christ’s parents, not only his mother, but also his father, who was a parent in the same way that he was the mother’s spouse: in mind, not in the flesh.’ In this marriage none of the requisites of marriage were lacking: ‘In Christ’s parents all the goods of marriage were realized—offspring, fidelity, the sacrament: the offspring being the Lord Jesus himself; fidelity, since there was no adultery: the sacrament, since there was no divorce’.”

“It is to Joseph, then, that the messenger turns, entrusting to him the responsibilities of an earthly father with regard to Mary’s Son” (Guardian of the Redeemer, 3, emphasis mine).

Fr. Larry M. Toschi, O.S.J. is a renowned Josephologist concludes “Because of his true marriage to Mary, Jesus’ mother, Joseph is truly Jesus’ father, though not in a natural, biological sense. ... His legal fatherhood is certainly key to Matthew 1, and it must be understood that in semitic thought it was as real as biological paternity. ... Besides passing on a name in the line of David, Joseph also gives the faith name “Jesus,” meaning “Savior” (Mt 1:20,25). ... To all appearances Jesus is known as Joseph’s “son,” so much so that people have difficulty imagining anything different (Mt 13:55)” (*Joseph in the New Testament* [Santa Cruz, CA: Guardian of the Redeemer Books, 1991], 38).

So, as we consider the Holy Family, it is very clear that within a proper context of Jesus’ divine origins and virgin birth, and rejecting the secularism and skepticism of our current age, we can certainly understand the phrase “Joseph the father of Jesus” as not only acceptable but also completely faithful to Scripture, Catholic tradition, the Doctors of the Church, and Pope John Paul II.

With Mary we acknowledge Joseph as the legal father of Our Lord—the father chosen by God himself. What a marvelous man he must have been; what a wonderful father he proved to be. What an example for all fathers today.

St. Joseph, pray for us.