

Re-examining the Influence of The Old Testament Background on Joseph's Fatherhood in Mathew 1:18-20a

Sachia Ikyernum¹ , Silas Gudamishi², Jonathan Oraduen Tarter³

University of Ibadan, Nigeria^{1,2,3}

ephraimikyernum@gmail.com

Histori

Submitted : 22 Nov 2025

Revised : 27 Nov 2025

Accepted : 27 Nov 2025

Published : 31 Dec 2025

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.69668/sejati.v2i2.159>

Deskripsi

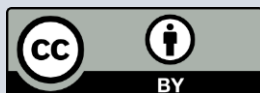
This article is a research project in the field of biblical theology which takes up the topic of Joseph's fatherhood in Mathew 1:18-20a which has roots in the teachings of the Old Testament.

Sitasi

Ikyernum, S., Gudamishi, S., & Tarter, J. O. (2025). Re-examining the Influence of the Old Testament Background on Joseph's Fatherhood in Mathew 1:18-20. *Student Evangelical Journal Aiming At Theological Interpretation*, 2(2), 110–127. <https://doi.org/10.69668/sejati.v2i2.159>

Copyright

©2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.



Abstract

This study re-examines the influence of the Old Testament background on the portrayal of Joseph's fatherhood in Matthew 1:18–20. Addressing gaps in prior scholarship that treats legal or theological aspects separately, this article integrates Jewish conceptions of righteousness, law, and familial duty to explain Joseph's actions. Through grammatico-historical exegesis, the study shows that Mary's pregnancy during betrothal constituted a serious legal violation. Joseph's intention to divorce her quietly reflects his identity as dikaios, balancing Torah justice (mishpat) and compassion (chesed). The analysis further argues that divine revelation transforms Joseph's righteousness, leading him beyond legal compliance to obedient faith. By accepting Jesus as his legal son, Joseph fulfills Old Testament ideals of Davidic lineage and responsible fatherhood. Consequently, Joseph's fatherhood exemplifies a transition from legal piety to faithful discipleship, offering ethical implications for parenting and church teaching.

Keywords: *fatherhood; Joseph; Old Testament; Matthew 1:18-20; messianic lineage*

Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji ulang pengaruh latar belakang Perjanjian Lama terhadap penggambaran peran kebapaan Yusuf dalam Matius 1:18–20. Dengan menanggapi kekosongan dalam penelitian sebelumnya yang cenderung memisahkan aspek legal dan teologis, artikel ini mengintegrasikan konsepsi Yahudi tentang kebenaran, hukum, dan tanggung jawab keluarga untuk menjelaskan tindakan Yusuf. Melalui eksegesis gramatikal-historis, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kehamilan Maria pada masa pertunangan merupakan pelanggaran hukum yang serius. Niat Yusuf untuk menceraikan Maria secara diam-diam mencerminkan identitasnya sebagai dikaios, yang menyeimbangkan keadilan Taurat (mishpat) dan belas kasih (chesed). Analisis ini selanjutnya berargumen bahwa wahyu ilahi mentransformasi kebenaran Yusuf, membawanya melampaui ketaatan legal menuju iman yang taat. Dengan menerima Yesus sebagai anaknya secara legal, Yusuf menggenapi ideal Perjanjian Lama tentang garis keturunan Daud dan kebapaan yang bertanggung jawab, serta menghadirkan implikasi etis bagi pengasuhan dan pengajaran gereja.

Kata kunci: *peran ayah; Yusuf; Perjanjian Lama; Matius 1:18-20; garis keturunan mesianik*

INTRODUCTION

The figure of Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew, particularly in the infancy narrative (1:18-20), presents a critical character whose actions are deeply rooted in the Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish traditions. Fatherhood in this context extends beyond biology to encompass legal, social, and spiritual dimensions, including the responsibility to provide, teach, and maintain a family's covenant standing within Israel. Understanding Joseph's decision-making process—from his initial plan for a quiet divorce to his ultimate acceptance of Jesus—requires a thorough grounding in the Jewish conceptions of righteousness (*tzedaqah*), betrothal law, and the role of the father as the guardian of lineage and piety.

Existing scholarship on Joseph's fatherhood has provided valuable but fragmented insights. Previous studies have extensively explored the legal and social dimensions of his actions (Brown, 1993; Keener, 2009; Davies & Allison, 2004), while others have focused on his theological function in fulfilling Davidic messianism (Bock, 2002; Witherington, 2006; Hagner, 1993). Concurrently, research on Jewish fatherhood ideals offers a broader cultural backdrop (Holland, 1988; Snyder, 2010). However, a critical gap remains: there is a lack of a synthesized study that systematically traces how specific Old Testament and Jewish background principles—regarding righteousness, law, familial duty, and divine revelation—directly shape and define the very conception of Joseph's fatherhood as portrayed in Matthew 1:18-20. This study identifies and addresses this gap by moving beyond isolated legal or theological readings to argue for a foundational Old Testament construct underlying Joseph's character arc.

The primary purpose of this study is to re-examine and demonstrate the profound influence of the Old Testament background on the characterization of Joseph's fatherhood in Matthew 1:18-20. It aims to synthesize legal, theological, and socio-cultural perspectives to argue that Joseph's actions are a direct embodiment of core Jewish fatherhood tenets. This re-examination is necessary to provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of Joseph as a character whose righteousness evolves in response to divine intervention, modeling a transition from strict legal piety to faithful discipleship. This research focuses exegetically on Matthew 1:18-20, with necessary references to the broader Matthean infancy narrative (1:1-25). The analysis is delimited to the influence of the Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish traditions on the text. While acknowledging synoptic parallels, the study does not undertake a comparative analysis of other Gospels, ensuring a concentrated examination of Matthew's unique portrayal of Joseph.

The findings of this study contribute to biblical scholarship by offering a synthesized framework for understanding Joseph's fatherhood, bridging the gap between legal, theological, and social interpretations. Furthermore, the research has practical implications for contemporary discussions on ethical parenting, responsible fatherhood, and family stability, particularly in contexts involving non-biological or blended families. It provides a theological resource for church teachings on the integration of justice and compassion, and faithfulness to divine guidance. This study employs a biblical exegesis methodology, primarily utilizing the grammatico-historical approach. This approach involves a detailed analysis of the Greek text

of Matthew 1:18-20, including textual criticism, lexical analysis, and grammatical-syntactical study, to understand the passage within its original linguistic and historical context. Qualitatively, the research features interaction with existing literature, including biblical texts (Revised Standard Version), peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly books. The data collected is subjected to a context-content thematic analysis to identify and interpret key themes related to righteousness, law, and fatherhood. The theoretical framework is informed by the Jewish ideal of the *tzadik* (the righteous man), which integrates legal adherence (*mishpat*) with compassion (*chesed*) and is open to divine revelation.

The figure of Joseph in Matthew's Gospel has historically been examined through limited, distinct angles, creating a gap in a comprehensive understanding of his character. Previous scholarship has primarily focused on the legal and social dimensions of Joseph's actions. Scholars like Brown (1993) provide a meticulous exegesis of the infancy narratives, detailing Joseph's legal righteousness and his decision to divorce Mary quietly, situating this dilemma within Jewish betrothal law. This legalistic framework is reinforced by Keener (2009), who explains the social shame and legal implications, and Davies and Allison (2004), who dissect the passage's structure to interpret Joseph's righteousness as a blend of legal adherence and compassion.

Concurrently, other scholars have explored the theological implications of Joseph's obedience. Bock (2002) and Witherington (2006) examine his role through the lens of Davidic messianism, highlighting how his acceptance of Jesus fulfills prophecies of a Davidic heir. Hagner (1993) also focuses on the theological significance of Joseph's dream-theophanies and his function as an agent who moves the messianic narrative forward. These studies, however, often treat Joseph as a theological functionary rather than examining the foundational Old Testament principles shaping his understanding of fatherhood.

Furthermore, research exists on the broader concept of fatherhood within Jewish and early Christian contexts. Holland (1988), for instance, explores philosophical and rabbinic ideals of the father's role, providing a foundational cultural backdrop for the values Joseph would have embodied. Building on this, Gordon (1977) offers a socio-historical analysis of family structures in Second Temple Judaism, arguing that the father's primary role was that of a covenant guardian and teacher of Torah, a perspective that illuminates the societal expectations placed upon Joseph. More recent studies have further nuanced this picture. Bartlett (2008) synthesizes legal and prophetic traditions to define the Israelite father as a figure of justice (*mishpat*) and covenant fidelity, while Suarez (2012) specifically investigates the theme of "righteousness" (*tzedaqah*) in post-exilic narratives, demonstrating its evolution from strict legalism to include compassionate action.

A synthesis of these scholarly threads reveals a critical saturation point. The works of Brown, Keener, and others provide the legal context for Joseph's dilemma; the theological studies of Bock and Hagner explain the messianic consequence of his obedience; and scholars like Holland, Gordon, Bartlett, and Suarez outline the general principles and evolving ideals of Jewish fatherhood and righteousness. However, there is a lack of a synthesized study that

systematically traces how these specific Old Testament and Jewish background principles regarding righteousness, law, familial duty, and divine revelation *directly shape and define the very conception of Joseph's fatherhood* as portrayed in Matthew 1:18-20. The existing literature treats these elements as parallel tracks; they do not fully integrate them to argue that Joseph's character arc is a direct narrative embodiment of a unified Old Testament fatherhood ideal. This is the gap the present article, "Re-examining the influence of the Old Testament Background on Joseph's fatherhood in Matthew 1:18-20," seeks to fill. It moves beyond a purely legal or theological reading to argue that Joseph's actions are a direct embodiment of the core, synthesized tenets of Jewish fatherhood as derived from the Old Testament.

METHODS

This study employs the exegetical method in studying the influence of the Old Testament Background on Joseph's fatherhood in Matthew 1:18-20. The method involved textual criticism, lexical analysis or word study, as well as grammatical and syntactical study of the original Hebrew text and the Greek text of Matthew 1:18-20. "While the grammatico-historical approach provides the foundational linguistic and historical context for understanding Joseph's dilemma, this study also incorporates insights from narrative criticism to analyze the literary construction of the passage. The grammatico-historical method illuminates *what* the terms and laws meant in their original setting (e.g., the meaning of *dikaioi*, the legal bonds of betrothal). To understand *how* the Matthean text uses these elements to craft a compelling theological portrait, we employ narrative criticism as a complementary lens. Specifically, narrative criticism is used to analyze the character arc of Joseph, tracing his internal conflict, decision-making process, and transformation from a man defined by Torah-based righteousness to one defined by revelation-based obedience. Secondly is to examine the plot dynamics of Matthew 1:18-20, identifying the points of tension, climax, and resolution that drive the narrative forward and establish Joseph's pivotal role in the messianic storyline.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Re-examining Fatherhood in the Old Testament

To understand Joseph's fatherhood, one must first grasp the holistic nature of the role within the Old Testament. Fatherhood (*av* in Hebrew, from the root אב) was fundamentally a legal and covenantal status that extended beyond biological procreation. A father (*av*) was the head of the household (*bet av*, "house of the father"), responsible for its physical sustenance, spiritual instruction, and the preservation of its lineage and covenant standing within Israel (Holland, 1988; Bartlett, 2008).

This role was defined by several key functions which will be discussed in the next sub-heading that directly inform Joseph's dilemma and actions in Matthew 1:18-20. A primary duty of the Israelite father was to ensure the legitimacy and continuity of his family line. This was

crucial for the inheritance of land, a key aspect of the covenant and for maintaining the purity of the community, especially concerning the Davidic line (2 Samuel 7:12-16). The laws against adultery (Exodus 20:14) and the status of a *mamzer* (Deuteronomy 23:3) were designed to protect this very social and theological structure. Joseph, as a "son of David," bears this responsibility acutely. The father was the local arbiter of justice within his household, expected to uphold the Torah's standards. This justice (*mishpat*), however, was ideally tempered with compassion (*chesed*), a loyal, covenantal love. The ideal of the righteous man (*tzadig*), a title Matthew applies to Joseph, embodies this balance between unwavering commitment to the law and merciful action (Psalms 112:4-5; Proverbs 20:7).

The father was the economic foundation of the family, providing food, shelter, and security. He was also responsible for the religious and vocational training of his children (Deuteronomy 6:7; Proverbs 1:8). This role as provider and guardian is not negated by a lack of biological connection, as seen in the legal norms around adoption and the responsibility of a kinsman-redeemer (*go'el*). This Old Testament framework establishes that fatherhood is constituted by legal responsibility and covenantal fidelity, not merely biology. Joseph's crisis emerges precisely at the intersection of these duties: his obligation to uphold the law concerning a betrothed woman found pregnant, his compassion for Mary, and his role as the guardian of the Davidic lineage into which the Messiah must be legally incorporated. His actions throughout Matthew 1:18-25 are a lived-out response to these competing, yet ultimately reconcilable, Old Testament ideals.

Key Important functions of Jewish Fatherhood

Availability and Stability

Harmony and stability in the spousal relationship lie at the core of good fathering. The decision to raise children should be made responsibly. A fleeting romance, resulting in an unexpected pregnancy, may not prove to be the best arrangement for having a child. The child that is conceived by two consenting and committed adults will have a firm foundation. A man who channels his sexual energy towards creating new life, and not only for the sake of personal gratification, will be more inclined to remain with his partner and care for his child. The decision to voluntarily take part in raising a family may be the most critical part of fathering. It requires maturity, responsibility, and long-term thinking. The act of impregnating a woman hardly warrants the title father. Beyond the framework of Jewish law regarding fathering behavior, the tradition upholds the need for a warm and supportive relationship between the husband and wife. Mutual respect and a common purpose are main ingredients for raising well-adjusted children. The tradition warns the husband against creating a fearful atmosphere in the home. This negative behavior caused a national catastrophe in the Book of Judges. The husband is also cautioned not to cause his wife to cry (Levitz, 2014).

Couplehood as a Vehicle for Holiness

Fidelity is a basic requirement in the traditional home. The tradition sees the home as a resting place for the Divine Presence. When husband and wife live in trust and harmony, their

home is seen as a place of holiness. The couple must strive to preserve and protect the marital bond by not allowing external distractions or temptations to influence them. This aspect of loyalty plays a major role in the mission of Jewish fatherhood. When discussing the concept of holiness in the Biblical text, the Rabbis explain this abstract term to refer to abstention from inappropriate sexual activity. The provided text is a quote from Leviticus which the core commandment is: קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם - "You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2). The Rabbis interpret this as: וְאַבְדַּל אֶתְכֶם מִן־הָעַמִּים לְהִזְוֹת לִי - "And I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine" (Leviticus 20:26), which they understood to mean separation from forbidden sexual relations. Rashi, basing his comment on the Midrash (Snyder, 2010), highlights the connection between chaste sexual behavior and spirituality. The Torah states, "Be holy", and the Rabbis interpret, "Separate yourselves from illicit relations". The Rabbis understood well the challenges of temptation and the physical attraction between men and women. They acknowledged the existence of sexual desire and promoted satisfying those needs under certain conditions. Although abstinence is not allowed, due to the imperative of procreation, the Rabbis cautioned against wanton, unbridled sexual gratification. They contended that the more one experienced sexual pleasure, the greater the appetite, as captured in the phrase: "(God) satiates the sated and makes the hungry hungry" (A Talmudic maxim from Yoma 74b, meaning indulgence increases desire rather than satisfying it). This does not infer that the tradition views sexual behavior in a negative light. Rather, it recognizes the intensity that it can bring, both for the good and the bad.

Mutual Respect

It is essential for the father to maintain a stable and harmonious relationship with his wife. A man who accords honor to his wife will be able to establish a healthy and proper environment in the home. This positive foundation acts like fertile soil for the development of the children. Maimonides includes the following guidelines for spousal behavior in the laws of marriage: "And so a man is obligated to honor his wife more than his own body... and their words should be pleasant, and both of them should be cheerful and good-hearted. And it is forbidden for a man to impose excessive fear upon his wife, and his words with her should be gentle, and he should not be melancholy or quick-tempered." The man is required to treat his wife better than he would treat himself, speak to her in gentle tones, and not be quick to anger. The wife is also requested to show respect towards her husband, and provide for him according to his wishes. Maimonides suggests that this is the secret for promoting long lasting relationships, a necessary step towards positive parenting (Holland, 1988).

Based on the foregoing, the discussion of Joseph's character reaches its climax in his decision to obey the divine dream. This act transforms him from a man defined by traditional Torah piety into a model of a "new and greater righteousness" based on faith in divine revelation. Initially, Joseph's plan for a quiet divorce is a perfect example of traditional Jewish righteousness. As a *δίκαιος* (righteous) man, he seeks to balance the demands of the Law (*mishpat*) with compassion (*chesed*) for Mary (Davies & Allison, 2004). His righteousness at this stage is about correctly applying the Torah to a difficult situation. He is a "son of the law,"

and his actions are guided by its statutes (Keener, 2009). This shows that Joseph was a devout man who took his faith and its legal requirements seriously.

However, the angelic revelation in the dream creates a crisis for this traditional understanding of righteousness. The command to take Mary as his wife goes directly against the law he was trying to uphold. According to the Torah, a pregnancy under these circumstances was evidence of sin, requiring a response like divorce (Deuteronomy 22:20-21). By telling Joseph to ignore this legal conclusion, the angel calls him to a higher standard. This is where Joseph embodies what some scholars call a "higher righteousness." Hagner (1993) explains that in Matthew's Gospel, true righteousness is not just about external obedience to rules. It is about a heart-oriented obedience to God's will, even when that will seem to contradict conventional understanding. Joseph is faced with a choice: follow the clear teaching of the written Law, or obey the direct, personal revelation from God. His decision to obey the dream is the moment he moves from one form of righteousness to the other.

This new righteousness is based on faith. Joseph has no proof other than the dream itself. He must trust that God is speaking to him and that the impossible—a virgin conception—is true. Keener (2009) points out that Joseph's faith here is remarkable. He believes a message that, from a human perspective, could easily be dismissed as a fantasy or a trick. His righteousness is now defined not by the Law alone, but by his faithful response to God's unexpected command (Mielcarek, 2023). This anticipates the teaching of Jesus later in Matthew, where he tells his followers that their righteousness must "exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew 5:20), which is a righteousness of the heart and spirit, not just the letter of the law.

Furthermore, this act makes Joseph a pivotal figure in God's salvation plan. By accepting Jesus as his legal son, Joseph does more than just show personal faith. He actively secures Jesus' lineage back to King David, fulfilling a core Old Testament prophecy (2 Samuel 7:12-16). As Bock (2002) and Witherington (2006) emphasize, Joseph's obedience is the human mechanism that legally brings the Messiah into the Davidic line. His fatherhood, therefore, becomes the channel through which God's promises are fulfilled.

The Influence of the Old Testament Background on Joseph's Fatherhood in Mathew 1:18-20

The first verse of Mathew 1:18-20 begins with Jesus' birth. It reads that: "Now, the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit" (Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γέννησις οὕτως ἦν. Μνηστευθείσης γὰρ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Μαρίας τῷ Ἰωσήφ, πρὶν ἢ συνελθεῖν αὐτούς, εὗρέθη ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου), (The Holy Bible, RSV 2008, Metzger, (1971).

Here, the author of Mathew's gospel starts by explaining how Jesus' birth happened. Something spectacular must have taken place to warrant this explanation by the author. Otherwise, there are many common stories of birth of newborn babies of those days. The part A of the first verse introduces the marriage arrangement between Joseph and Mary. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. According to the Jewish tradition, betrothal entails a formal marriage that

has been concluded and the dowry or bride price has been paid but not yet consummated (D'Souza, 2022). According to the culture of the Jews, the practice of 'Betrothal' was very common. It was not like engagement or courtship in today's usage. It was actually a real marriage arrangement that has taken place. This is because the dowry was duly paid, only that the marriage has not yet been consummated. And since the art of betrothal was very much recognized, certain laws were made to guide its practice.

Within the context of betrothal agreements in ancient Israel, a woman's virginity was esteemed as a significant virtue. This cultural premium placed on premarital chastity is deeply embedded in the Hebrew language and legal texts. The terminology itself is revealing; the feminine noun for virgin, *betulah*, is employed frequently, while its plural form *betulim*, referring to the physical "tokens of virginity," appears multiple times, underscoring its social and legal importance (Wenham, 1972; Wadsworth, 1972).

This elevated status for virginity is codified in religious law, most notably in Leviticus 21:13-14, which stipulates that the high priest must marry a woman who is a virgin. This requirement was not merely ceremonial; it was intrinsically tied to the priest's role in consecrating holy objects. As Bergen (2022) notes, the high priest's entire existence, including his marriage, was to reflect ritual purity and wholeness, qualities symbolized by a virgin bride (p. 45). Consequently, the prohibition against marrying a widow or divorcee served to maintain the symbolic integrity of his sacred office. The Old Testament's emphasis on premarital sexual purity is further evidenced by its strong prohibitions against adultery and fornication. However, this valuation was not about perpetual celibacy. Virginity was perceived as a state of freshness and purity destined for a specific culmination: its joyful relinquishment within the covenant of marriage (Davidson, 2007). This ideal makes narratives of its violation all the more poignant. The grief and crisis precipitated by the premarital defilement of Dinah, Jacob's daughter (Genesis 34), illustrates the profound social and personal consequences of losing this virtue outside of marriage. Similarly, the tragic story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:37 is profoundly telling; faced with death, her primary lament was not for her life itself, but for her virginity, which she would never have the opportunity to surrender in marriage (Schmitt, 1991). This act of "bemoaning her virginity" highlights how a woman's identity and social value were, in that cultural framework, intimately connected to her chaste status.

In the story of Joseph and Mary, it is clear that Joseph's family and Mary's family had done what needed to be done. The union had been sealed and tied through betrothal. The bride price had been paid and it was just a matter of time before the marriage would be consummated. Everything was going fine until something strange, unusual, incriminating or forbidden had happened. This leads us to the next subtitle.

"Found to be with a child" (τὸ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθῆν) Matthew 1:18

Turning to the part B of the same verse, it establishes that "Before they came together" (πρὶν ἢ συναλθεῖν αὐτούς). This is the confirmation that Joseph has not consummated the marriage covenant with Mary. They have not started living together, when Mary was found to be with a child (τὸ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθῆν). According to the Jewish tradition, the child that is given

birth as a result of the agreement of two responsible adults strong background. Being faithful to each other is one basic requirement of a Jewish home (Cotton, 2022), but in Mary's case, the suspicion was not the same. She was found to be with a child. Mary's pregnancy before her final marriage consummation with Joseph had serious far-reaching consequences that could cost her life. She had violated the laws pertaining to "virginity" and "betrothal" as discussed above. Standing accused, she had committed three offences. The first is adultery, otherwise known as "extramarital affairs". The second has to do with premarital sex with a betrothed virgin and the third issue is having a child out of wedlock. Adultery is found in this case because in the Jewish tradition, the status of betrothal is equivalent to that of marriage. And since Joseph was already married to Mary, then it is the case of adultery, which is the distortion of the divine ideal. The sin of adultery was considered a great crime and the death penalty for committing adultery are found almost universally in the ancient Near East, including the Jewish tradition.

Ancient Near Eastern law codes and the Israelite Decalogue both severely condemned adultery but employed different legal frameworks. Mesopotamian laws, like those of Ur-Nammu, Hammurabi, and the Middle Assyrians, used a case-based (casuistic) format, often prescribing death and focusing on the wife's actions and the context of the offense (Roth, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c). In contrast, the Hebrew Bible established an absolute, unconditional (apodictic) law with the Seventh Commandment's simple prohibition: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). This principle was radicalized by the Tenth Commandment, which forbade coveting a neighbor's wife, thereby internalizing the prohibition and targeting lustful intent (Exodus 20:17). This shift from regulating external action to governing internal desire marked a significant theological development (Friedman, 2017). Thus, while Mesopotamian law managed the social consequences of adultery, the Decalogue established a comprehensive standard for sexual fidelity.

Aside the issue of adultery is an issue of premarital sex with a betrothal virgin. By accusation, Mary had been defiled. She is now deflowered. From the foregoing punishment on having sex with a betrothal virgin, Mary is found guilty. She must have been defiled in the city and not the country side where the issue would be considered as rape. She is therefore liable for judgment. But the last that broke the Carmel's back is the child Mary is found with. And since Joseph, the supposed husband of Mary is not the father of the child, then, Biblical law sought to prevent the social stigma of illegitimacy. A child born out of wedlock, referred to as a *mamzer*, was explicitly barred from the assembly of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:3). To avert this situation, other statutes required a man who had premarital intercourse with a woman to marry her, thereby legally legitimizing any resulting offspring and integrating them into the community (Deuteronomy 22:29) (Baden, 2015).

Thus, the exclusion of illegitimately conceived children, whatever situations are specifically targeted by the legislation from the assembly of Israel until the tenth generation seems to underscore God's regard for the sanctity of marriage (Kaiser Jr., 1980; Hamilton, 1997). Going by the foregoing explanation, Mary seemed to have violated all the laws relating

to the sanctity of marriage. However, the next verse would bring another dimension into the scenario.

The immaculate conception of Jesus Christ (Child of the Holy Spirit Πνεύματος Αγίου)

Still in verse 18 of Mathew 1, the seemingly alleged conception of Mary's child had been attributed to the Holy Spirit (Πνεύματος Αγίου). The inclusion of this clause into the event seems to change the entire dynamics of the story. Mary's defense is finally here. The defense is so strong that no one dare question the interference of Yahweh, the God of Israel into the matter. Although Mary is bound to Joseph, both are answerable to Yahweh, who is the reason for their existence. They owe their existence and marriage to Him. Whatever He deemed fit to use them for, no one could question His authority. Although Mary stood accused of adultery, extramarital affairs and had conceived a child out of wedlock, which are far reaching grievous consequences that any Jew can bear, the Holy Spirit Himself, the spirit of Yahweh was involved. The biblical narrative indicates that Mary informed Joseph of her divine visitation, wherein the angel Gabriel announced her forthcoming virginal conception. The angel declared she would bear a son named Jesus, who would be called the Son of God and inherit the eternal throne of David (Luke 1:26-35). This account establishes the theological foundation for Jesus as the messianic heir (Brown, 1993). The above is Mary's defense and explanation to what had gotten her pregnant but would Joseph believe her? We will find out in verse 19.

Joseph's righteousness (δίκαιος Mathew 1:19)

The text reads; "And her husband, Joseph being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. Ἰωσήφ δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς, δίκαιος ὢν καὶ μὴ θέλων αὐτὴν παραδειγματίσαι, ἐβουλήθη λάθρα ἀπολῦσαι αὐτήν (The Holy Bible, RSV 2008, Metzger, (1971).

After Joseph had heard Mary's defense of the pregnancy being of the Holy Spirit, he did not believe her, hence his resolve to divorce her quietly. Joseph's demonstration of his quietness towards Mary reflects the characteristics of mutual respect. As highlighted above, the marital ethic requires a man to extend selfless care to his wife, communicating with gentleness and consistent forbearance. One thing is striking about the kind of person Joseph is. This verse describes Joseph as a "just man" (δίκαιος). A term that is difficult to come by for a Jew. Even St. Paul, the master of the law, the pharisee of the pharisees could not attain this height as a Jew. He had confessed in the letter to the Romans of his inability to keep the law. He said that the things he wishes to do, he found himself unable to do them but the bad. If therefore, he is unable to do the good, it then signifies his sinful nature. However, in this case, Joseph is described as a just man. In the Hebrew Bible, the ideal of the *tzadik* (righteous man) is a central figure, appearing over two hundred times. This concept extends beyond mere legal observance to represent a holistic model of piety grounded in the Torah, which serves as a continual guide for wisdom and daily living. This understanding of righteousness as devotion to divine law is also affirmed in rabbinic and Qumran literature (Condra, 2002; Oegema, 2007).

According to scholars, Joseph's righteousness has brought some arguments as some tied to the fact that he chooses not to embarrass Mary and this qualifies him as righteous.

Joseph's righteousness is demonstrated not by publicly shaming Mary, but by his decision to divorce her quietly to uphold the Law without causing her undue harm. This initial, Torah-observant justice proves insufficient, requiring divine intervention to resolve the dilemma. The angel's message calls Joseph to a higher righteousness, compelling him to transcend a strict legal interpretation and submit to a direct revelation of God's will. In this narrative, Matthew contrasts two forms of justice: one based on Mosaic Law and another, greater righteousness required of Jesus' disciples, which Joseph embodies by his obedience to the angelic command (Mielcarek, 2023). In other words, the portrayal of Joseph, the husband of Mary, in the Gospel of Matthew (1:18--25) presents him as a figure who embodies two dimensions of righteousness: first, as a devout Jew faithful to the Torah, and second, as one who transcends strict legal adherence in response to divine revelation. This duality highlights a theological tension between traditional Jewish piety and the new demands of God's unfolding salvific plan. Matthew introduces Joseph as a *δίκαιος* (righteous) man (Matt 1:19), a term deeply rooted in Jewish piety. His righteousness is initially demonstrated through his commitment to the Mosaic Law. Upon discovering Mary's pregnancy, he resolves to divorce her quietly, adhering to Deuteronomic principles (Deuteronomy 22:20--21, 23--24) while also showing compassion (Keener, 2009). This reflects the balance between justice (*mishpat*) and mercy (*chesed*), key aspects of Jewish ethical conduct. Joseph's initial decision aligns with Pharisaic interpretations of righteousness, which emphasized strict adherence to Torah commandments. His piety is thus framed within Second Temple Judaism's legal and ethical expectations (Sanders, 1990).

However, Joseph's righteousness evolves when an angel appears to him in a dream (Matt 1:20--21), instructing him to take Mary as his wife despite her seemingly scandalous pregnancy. This divine intervention requires him to move beyond the written Law and submit to a higher revelation. This shift signifies a *new righteousness*, one that is not merely about legal observance but about obedient participation in God's redemptive plan (Hagner, 1993). Unlike the Pharisees, who sought righteousness through meticulous Torah observance (Matt 5:20), Joseph's righteousness is now defined by faith in divine revelation. This anticipates Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where true righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (Dalton, 2022). In conclusion therefore, Joseph's character arc in Matthew's Gospel demonstrates a movement from traditional Torah-based righteousness to a higher, revelation-based righteousness. His initial commitment to the Law establishes his piety, but his submission to the angelic message shows that true righteousness involves discernment and obedience to God's unfolding will. This anticipates the New Covenant's emphasis on faith and divine guidance over mere legal compliance (Brown, 1993).

Joseph's quiet divorce (Divorce quietly, λάθρα ἀπολῦσαι) Matthew 1:19

In the preceding verse, it is been stated that Joseph is indeed a just man. However, he could not tolerate Mary's situation. He did not believe her claim of divine will. His resolve to

divorce Mary indicates his psychological imbalance. His psyche was disturbed, his non-acceptance, shock, pain and the emotional trauma he experienced is what must have led to his resolve to divorce Mary. No matter what explanation Mary had given, it did not make sense to Joseph. He must have thought that if indeed Mary's claim is true, then he is supposed to have a confirmation as well. This is typical of divine assignments of this nature amongst the Israelite concerning children born in a miraculous way.

When an angel appeared to Manoah's wife who was barren and told her the word of the Lord that "you shall conceive and bear a son" the woman came and told her husband about it. But the husband enquired for confirmation and said "O Lord, I pray thee, let the man of God whom thou didst send, come again to us and teach us what we are to do about the boy." Judges 13:8. And the same angel came to come back to confirm his message. In the case of Elizabeth and Zachariah, and the child "John the baptist" although the angel spoke only to Zachariah while in the temple, the receiving end of conception and birth of John by Elizabeth in her deep 'old age', a record that is humanly impossible to comprehend is a confirmation that it was indeed a divine assignment; same goes for Hannah who got her own child, Samuel after several years of waiting.

However, in the case of Joseph, there seemed to be nothing so special that would make Joseph believe that the child Mary was carrying in her womb was indeed from the Holy Spirit. This is because Mary was still young and a virgin. Her union was just at the betrothal stage, where a final consummation had not taken place. Thus, the issue of barrenness was out of it. And if indeed a messiah was to be born, Joseph would not believe that it would happen without human intervention. This is because, the prophecies that went forth concerning the messiah never indicated that the saviour would be born without human hands. None of the great prophets of old were born that way. As special as Isaac, the patriarch was born or as powerful as Samuel, John the Baptist and even Samson were born through a divine intervention, there was a cooperation by all the parents, even in their old age to make it a reality. In the case of Joseph, although the angel had visited Mary, her husband had not received a confirmation on his part. We are not also sure if he also prayed that the same angel that appeared to Mary and made all these things happen should also appear to him as well. His next action greatly confirms that indeed, Joseph was kept in the dark. He had therefore resolved to divorce Mary quietly. Even though Joseph chose to be discrete in the manner in which he wanted to divorce Mary, it does not change the fact that divorce was imminent, whether done in the open or in secrete.

Joseph's Divine Dream (In A Dream, "κατ' ὄναρ") Matthew 1:20

While Joseph had resolved to divorce Mary privately, divine confirmation arrived through a dream. Matthew 1:20 highlights this pivotal moment, noting that as Joseph was deeply contemplating his decision (αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμηθέντος), an angel of the Lord appeared to him "κατ' ὄναρ", a phrase unique to Matthew's Gospel for divinely sent dreams. Joseph's characterization as a righteous man is thus fulfilled; his spiritual discernment allowed him to accept the dream as a legitimate revelation that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. His

right standing with God enabled him to perceive the spiritual truth in this encounter, trusting the divine message over human judgment.

It takes great faith to agree to do what Joseph did for Jesus and Mary. You can notice that God only spoke to him through dreams even all through his role as a father to Jesus. It takes great faith to believe that what one sees in dreams is not simply a figment of one's imagination. It takes faith to believe that a young woman would conceive without knowing a man. Joseph's dealings with how God spoke to his servants of old and his own personal conviction about divine dreams was enough to be sure that indeed one can conceive and bore a child without any human interference. R.E Brown (1993) discovers the presence of angels in Joseph's dream to have exactly the same pattern in all descriptions and consists of four elements: 1. Introductory phrase, 2. Appearance of the angel, 3. Delivering the Lord's command, 4. Explanation of the reason why the presented actions are necessary. Thus, in the shortest possible way, Joseph is given a task to perform and an explanation of the reason for this situation. The time horizon of Joseph's dreams is very short. They do not concern the distant future, but are concrete instructions for the near future. Joseph must have recounted God's dealings with great men of God of old, like Jacob, Joseph, Solomon and Jeremiah, amongst others and was sure that God was actually speaking. He was given an instruction, a divine command, which will be discussed in the next subtitle.

Joseph Given Responsibility (Do not fear to take Mary. μή φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαριάμ) Matthew 1:20

The angel told Joseph in a dream saying "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which she is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. Ἰωσήφ υἱὸς Δαυίδ, μή φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκά σου· τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ Πνεύματός ἐστιν Ἁγίου (The Holy Bible, RSV 2008, Metzger, (1971). Joseph is first reminded by the angel that he is the "Son of David". Joseph was reminded of his identity as it poses a serious implication about the prophecy of the messiah that He would come from the root of David, the son of Jesse (Bock, 2002; Keener, 2009; Witherington, 2006). And Joseph, being in that lineage attest to this fact. Next was an instruction given saying "do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which she is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. Ἰωσήφ υἱὸς Δαυίδ, μή φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκά σου· τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ Πνεύματός ἐστιν Ἁγίου.

Now, Joseph is given responsibility, he is not to be afraid but accept Mary as his wife. The phrase "fear" indicates and confirms Joseph's doubts about the messiahship claim of Jesus' childhood. His deep contemplation about what Mary told him must have made him to be scared of taking responsibility. Indeed, Joseph was in a state of misery, confusion, in pain and in sober reflection about what had befallen Mary. But here, the angel had asked him not to fear to take Mary to be his wife. The phrase "take" indicates responsibility. The implication is that Joseph is going to take economic responsibility of a child that is not biologically his own. He is to assume a role, such as have never happened in Isreal. Any child born out of wedlock in the Jewish tradition was not to enter the assembly of the Lord. The only clause that would save the situation is if the man that defied the woman that led to the pregnancy goes ahead

to marry her. In that way, such a child would become legitimate. This is exactly what the angel was asking Joseph to do. He was to continue with his union with Mary in order to establish Jesus's legitimacy. Although the messiah had a divine father, he had to be accepted to the Israelite and be linked to an earthly father. The acceptance of this mandate by Joseph aside its divine nature also has other implications. One of the implications is from the economic perspective.

Joseph was to use his meagre earning job as a carpenter to take care of Mary and the child Jesus. His resolve to allow Jesus to be born in a manger proves his average income earning as a father. If Joseph was indeed rich enough, he could have been able to afford a better place for Mary to give birth even if there was lack of space, his money would have paved a way for him. Again, in a dream, prompted by a divine command, Joseph immediately uproots his family from Bethlehem to flee to Egypt. The Gospel of Matthew provides no description of the home or possessions they left behind, though it can be inferred from his trade as a carpenter that Joseph was not a man of great wealth. His ability to finance such a journey, however, suggests access to resources. Scholar T. Zhan (1903) posits that the valuable gifts from the Magi likely provided the necessary means. Furthermore, Joseph's economic stability in Egypt is evidenced by his capacity to later relocate the family not only back to Israel but specifically to Nazareth. Throughout these events, Joseph fully assumes the economic role of a father, providing for Jesus and covering the costs associated with religious rites like his circumcision and presentation at the temple.

Joseph being a man of lower economic status had gotten a pair of two turtle doves, such as required to perform this rite. He had enrolled Jesus in the Synagogue school, where he learns about the Torah, no wonder the elders were stunned at his great wisdom as he sat with them in the temple, listening to them and asking them questions. Joseph must have also given Jesus a source of livelihood as required of any Jewish father. No wonder Jesus was referred to as the carpenter's son. The bible records in Luke 2:42 that he returned with his parents and was obedient unto them. He must have learnt to help his father in the carpentry business. The question arises that if Joseph could all these to a child that is not biologically related to him, can others do the same when met with the same condition? Although Joseph had a reason that the child he was helping was a messiah, can others also hold unto a reason that the child they have discovered not to be theirs can still be shown compassion owing to the fact that they are innocent and did not make themselves?

Joseph's Disappearance in the Gospels

Joseph's disappearance has thrown scholars into a heated debate as some attribute that Joseph's disappearance is as a result of the fact that the story of Joseph, being Jesus's father was not authentic but a latter addition. Some says Joseph was an old man who died after Jesus was 12. And others think that he abandoned his fatherhood responsibility to Jesus because Jesus was not his child and by implication his elderly child. Scholars hold differing views on the historical figure of Joseph and his significance in the life of Jesus. Some, like L. Oberlinner (1975), argue that referring to Joseph as Jesus's father is highly problematic. He

contends that such references are absent from sources predating the split between the early Church and the Pharisaic synagogue after 70 CE, suggesting a wide gap between the historical Jesus and later gospel traditions.

However, this position is contested. The Gospels of Mark and Luke, which claim connections to eyewitness testimony, explicitly acknowledge Joseph's fatherhood, making a complete fabrication unlikely. J.P. Meier (1991) acknowledges the "notable silence" about Joseph in the public ministry narratives but does not see it as an "unbridgeable gulf." He finds the traditional explanation that Joseph had died by the time Jesus began his public work to be the most probable.

This view is supported by early Christian tradition. Texts like the Protoevangelium of James and church fathers such as Epiphanius depict Joseph as an elderly widower with children from a previous marriage when he married Mary. His advanced age would explain his absence from Jesus' adult life. The alternative theory that Joseph abandoned his paternal duties is untenable. The narrative evidence shows a man who fully accepted Jesus as his own, providing for him, ensuring his education, and fulfilling all required religious rites, making a later abandonment out of character.

Joseph's Truthfulness and Its Implications for Ethical Parenting, Church Teachings, and Policy

The examination of Joseph's fatherhood is not merely a historical or exegetical exercise; it yields profound implications for contemporary understandings of ethical parenting, pastoral practice, and family policy. Joseph's arc from legal righteousness to revelation-based obedience provides a timeless model for responsible fatherhood as highlighted below:

A Model for Ethical Parenting and Blended Families

Joseph's acceptance of a child not biologically his own offers a powerful paradigm for ethical parenting in contexts of adoption, foster care, and blended families. His actions demonstrate that fatherhood is fundamentally constituted by covenantal commitment, legal responsibility, and active provision, rather than mere biological connection. In an era where non-traditional family structures are common, Joseph's story provides a theological foundation for the idea that a parent's love and duty are chosen and enacted, not merely inherited. His example challenges societal stigmas and calls fathers to see their role as a sacred stewardship, regardless of genetic links.

A Resource for Church Teachings on Justice and Compassion

Joseph's initial dilemma and its resolution serve as a perfect case study for church teachings on integrating justice (*mishpat*) and compassion (*chesed*). His "quiet divorce" represents an attempt to balance legal fidelity with mercy, prefiguring the heart of Christian ethics. His ultimate obedience to the divine dream then models a "higher righteousness" that prioritizes divine guidance and relational integrity over rigid legalism. This narrative can inform pastoral counseling, preaching, and discipleship, especially in situations involving marital crisis,

unexpected pregnancy, or social shame, guiding believers toward a grace-filled, discerning application of principle.

Informing Policy for Family Stability and Support

Joseph's economic provision for Jesus, despite his own modest means as a carpenter, highlights the critical role of the father as an economic stabilizer. This has direct implications for public policy. Governments and NGOs can draw from this model to strengthen support systems for low-income fathers and families. Promote policies that encourage male engagement and responsibility in child-rearing, such as paternity leave and parenting education and frame the role of a father as essential for the social, economic, and spiritual well-being of the child, thereby advocating for initiatives that bolster family unity and paternal involvement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has achieved its objective by demonstrating that the conception of Joseph's fatherhood in Matthew 1:18-20 is fundamentally constructed upon an Old Testament foundation. The analysis reveals that Joseph's character arc is a direct narrative embodiment of synthesized Jewish ideals, moving from a traditional, Torah-based righteousness to a transformative, revelation-based obedience. Confronted with a legal and social crisis, Joseph's initial plan for a quiet divorce perfectly balanced justice (*mishpat*) and compassion (*chesed*), reflecting the Old Testament ideal of the *tzadik*. However, through divine intervention, his righteousness evolved beyond strict legal adherence. Joseph thus exemplified a new, revelation-based righteousness that enabled him to be a responsible father to Jesus, fully assuming the legal, social, and economic duties of parenthood despite the biological discrepancy. By accepting this role, he secured the Messiah's Davidic lineage, fulfilling a core Old Testament prophecy and modeling a transition from legal piety to faithful discipleship. This research provides a synthesized framework that bridges legal, theological, and social interpretations, offering a more holistic understanding of Joseph's character and Matthew's unique presentation of a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. Joseph's example serves as a powerful model for ethical parenting, advocating for a fatherhood defined by covenantal commitment and active provision, which is especially relevant in contexts of adoption, foster care, and blended families. Building on these findings, further study could explore the reception of Joseph's character in early Jewish-Christian dialogue or conduct a comparative analysis of his revelation-based righteousness with similar patriarchal narratives in the Old Testament.

REFERENCES

- Baden, J. (2015). *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero*. HarperOne.
- Bartlett, R. A. (2008). *Covenant and Kinship: The Legal Role of the Father in Ancient Israel*. Eisenbrauns.

- Bergen, T. (2022). *Ritual Purity and Social Structure in Ancient Israel*. Oxford University Press.
- Bock, D. L. (2002). *Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring the portrait from the Gospels*. Baker Academic.
- Brown, R. E. (1993). *The birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Updated ed.). Doubleday.
- Childs, B. S. (1974). *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*. The Westminster Press.
- Condra, E. (2002). *Salvation for the righteous revealed: Jesus amid covenantal and messianic expectations in Second Temple Judaism*. Brill.
- Cotton, H. M. (2022). *The conception of Jesus*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH.
- Dalton, A. D. (2022). Fulfilled: Israel according to Matthew's Plerosis Paradigm. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 44(4), 475-493.
- Davidson, R. M. (2007). *Flame of Yahweh: A Theology of Sexuality in the Old Testament*. Hendrickson Publishers.
- Davies, W. D., & Allison, D. C. (2004). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (Vol. 1). T&T Clark International.
- Friedman, R. E. (2017). *The Exodus*. HarperOne.
- Gordon, R. P. (1977). The Targum to the Minor Prophets and the Fatherhood of God. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 2(3), 41-49.
- Hagner, D. A. (1993). *Matthew 1–13* (Vol. 33A). Word Books.
- Holland, J. (1988). *Maimonides on Family and Society*. Publisher.
- Keener, C. S. (2009). *The Gospel of Matthew: A socio-rhetorical commentary*. Eerdmans.
- Meier, J. P. (1991). *A marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus, Volume 1: The roots of the problem and the person*. Doubleday.
- Metzger, B. M. (1971). *A textual commentary on the Greek New Testament*. United Bible Societies.
- Mielcarek, K. (2023). The righteousness of Joseph in Matthew 1:18–25: A study in biblical theology. *Verbum Vitae*, 41(1), 123–145. <https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.15645>
- Oberlinner, L. (1975). *Historische Überlieferung und christologische Aussage: Zur Frage der 'Brüder Jesu' in der Synopse*. Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk.
- Oegema, G. S. (2007). "The coming of the righteous one" in 1 Enoch, Qumran, and the New Testament. In J. H. Charlesworth (Ed.), *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Scripture and the scrolls* (pp. 381–395). Baylor University Press.
- Roth, M. T. (1997). *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*. Scholars Press.

- Sanders, E. P. (1990). *Jewish law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five studies*. SCM Press.
- Schmitt, J. J. (1991). The Virgin of Israel: Referent and Use of the Phrase in Amos and Jeremiah. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 53(3), 365–387.
- Snyder, J. (2010). *Holiness and the Marital Bond: Rabbinic Ethics of Sexuality*. Publisher.
- Suarez, M. A. (2012). *From Legalism to Compassion: The Evolution of Righteousness in Post-Exilic Jewish Thought*. Brill.
- The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version. (2008). Bible Society Resources Ltd.
- Wadsworth, T. (1972). *The Semantics of Biblical Language*. Oxford University Press.
- Wenham, G. J. (1972). Betûlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age'. *Vetus Testamentum*, 22(3), 326–348.
- Witherington, B., III. (2006). *Matthew*. Smyth & Helwys Publishing.
- Zhan, T. (1903). The economic life of the Holy Family. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 22(1), 56–78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3268902>