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# BRIDGES FOR PEACE

## *Israel Teaching Letter*

Vol. # 771108

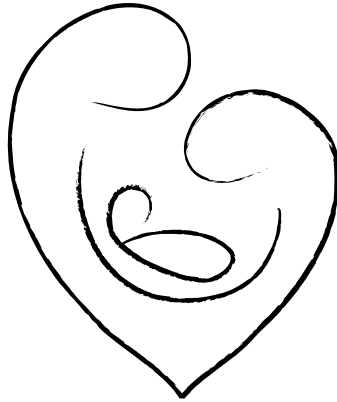
November 2008

# JOSEPH



## *A First-century* **Jewish Man**

**PART I**



## JOSEPH *the Man*

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## JOSEPH *the Husband*

Many of the characters mentioned in the Bible are shrouded in mystery. Although we recognize that God has placed them there to fulfill specific purposes, we often know little about who they really were. Joseph, the step-father of Yeshua (Jesus) is certainly one of those individuals. A search for information about him reveals little, and the most common phrases encountered are: “little is known” or “little can be known” about him. Truthfully, however, much can be known...if we know where to look to find the information. In this two-part teaching, we will dig into the Scriptures, history and Jewish tradition, examining his life on every level. In part 1, we will look at him as a first-century man and husband. In Part 2, we will discuss his role as a father. Through it all, Joseph will emerge from the shadows as a very real and vibrant man, and an example for us all.

The genealogy in Matthew 1:1–16 is a good place to start. Here, Joseph is clearly established as an Israelite of Israelites—a descendant not just of Abraham but of King David himself. A look at the rest of his story tells us that he was a just and righteous man and a dreamer of dreams; that he heard and obeyed the voice of God; and that he took extreme measures to protect his wife and her child. Combine all of that with what we know of first-century Israel and the Jewish people who lived there, and we can know this Joseph pretty well.

## Guided by *Torah*

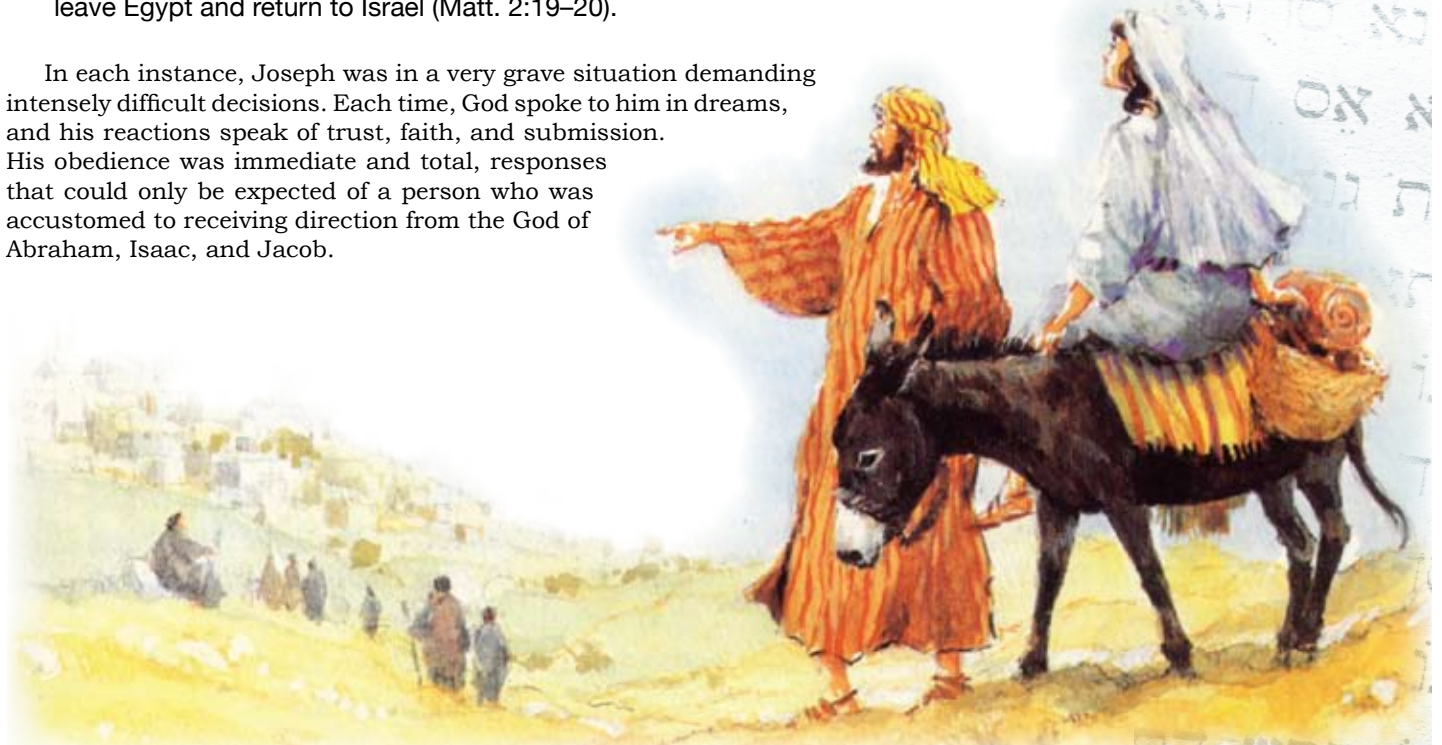
Repeatedly, throughout the story of Joseph, we see indications of his commitment to God's commandments. He was betrothed to marry, a Jewish custom requiring a period of time (often one year) between the establishment of the marriage covenant and the consummation of the marriage. During this time, cultural and religious traditions protected the sanctity of the relationship and the purity of the individuals. Unlike modern engagements, the betrothal was so binding it could only be set aside by an actual writ of divorce. It was during this time, that Miriam (Mary) was found to be pregnant, and Joseph must have been devastated. The *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) instructed him to put her away because of her seeming infidelity, and tradition allowed for public disgrace. But because of his just and merciful heart, he decided to do so through a private ceremony involving only two witnesses. As painful as it must have been, the observance of *Torah* took precedence in his life. Of course, the Scripture tells us that God intervened and put His stamp of approval on the union.

As a married man and father, that same dedication to a life of observant Judaism is seen. The book of Luke tells us that Yeshua was circumcised on the eighth day, accompanied his parents to Jerusalem for Miriam's purification ceremony 40 days after His birth, and was presented in the Temple for naming (2:21–24). Luke also informs us that Joseph and his family traveled to Jerusalem every year for the Feast of Passover (v. 41), one of the three pilgrim feasts found in the book of Leviticus. These are all important practices commanded in the *Torah* and central to first century Judaism. Clearly, Joseph's commitment to the faith of his fathers was solid and guided not only his own life, but that of his wife and children as well.

Equally important, however, is the fact that Joseph was no stranger to the audible voice of God. His relationship with the Lord was obviously one of depth and vitality; when God spoke, Joseph listened...and obeyed. At three very critical points, this interaction becomes clear:

- As Joseph contemplated the decision to divorce Miriam, God told him that her circumstances were indeed of His making and the marriage covenant should be finalized (Matt. 1:18–20).
- When danger of death threatened Joseph's newborn son, God directed him to take his family and flee to Egypt (Matt. 2:13).
- When their time of "dispersion" was ending, God made it clear that it was safe to leave Egypt and return to Israel (Matt. 2:19–20).

In each instance, Joseph was in a very grave situation demanding intensely difficult decisions. Each time, God spoke to him in dreams, and his reactions speak of trust, faith, and submission. His obedience was immediate and total, responses that could only be expected of a person who was accustomed to receiving direction from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.



His character  
was built  
on the  
foundations  
of monotheism  
and  
theocentrism.

## The First-century Jewish Male

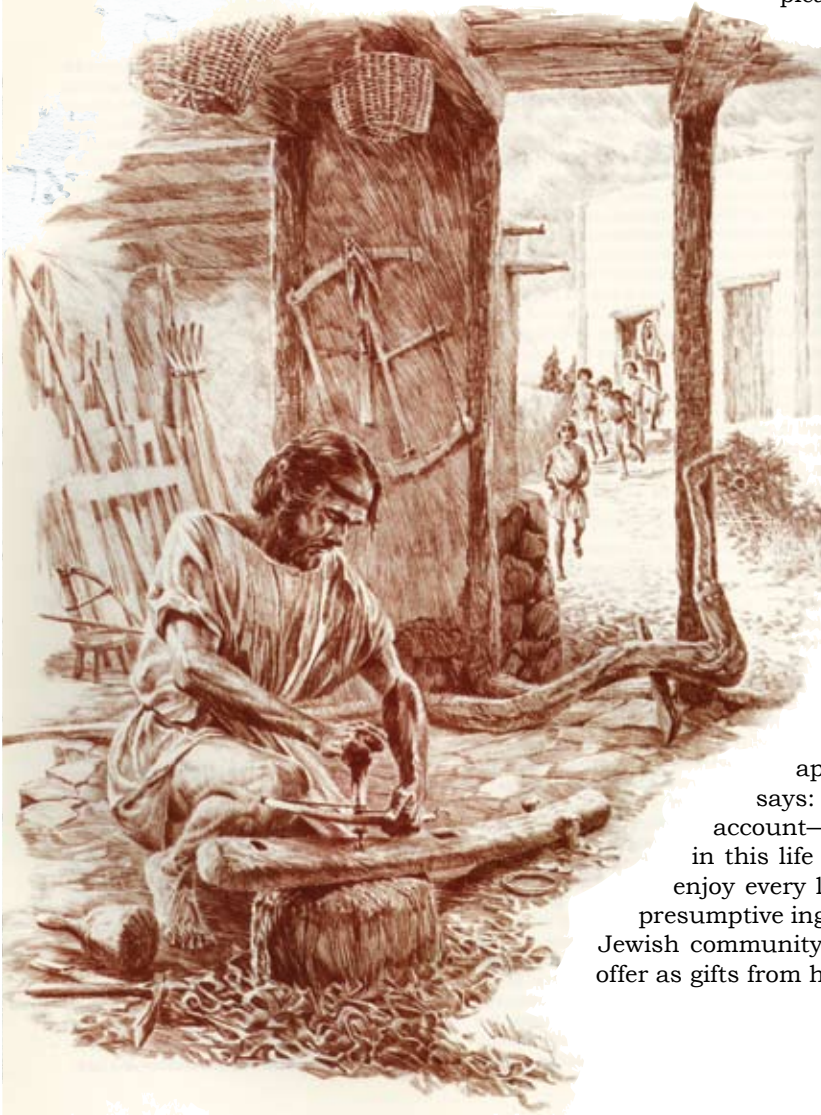
It is interesting to think of Joseph as more than a peripheral figure in this important story. He was hand-picked by the Lord of Hosts to fulfill a critically important role, and he brought with him all of the training and experiences of his life in order to do so. He was a man of Israel and a man of his day. He would have been trained, encouraged, shaped, and formed by the culture and Judaism of the first century. Although Scripture never mentions it, he certainly had a family, some of whom were more than likely alive to share in relationship with Joseph's new wife and son. He had a father, Yeshua's grandfather; the genealogy tells us his name was Jacob (Matt. 1:16).

When Joseph was a small boy, Jacob was responsible for his education. He would have taught Joseph *Torah*, the *aleph-bet* (Hebrew alphabet), and helped him to begin memorizing verses. It is safe to assume that Jacob was a skilled craftsman, either a stonemason or a carpenter, because he would have trained Joseph in those same skills. Jacob would have been highly instrumental in shaping Joseph's worldview, building his character on the foundations of monotheism and theocentrism. Through him, Joseph would have learned the fundamentals of being in a vibrant relationship with God. Jacob would have taught Joseph his son—and perhaps Yeshua, his grandson—how to view the world through Jewish eyes.

Those eyes perceived a world that was created by God with humanity's best interests at heart; fallen, yes, but still His. They saw a creation filled with beauty, love, and simple pleasures. Through those eyes, the world was the place

to experience fellowship, love, and salvation, the arena in which mankind could encounter God and live in vibrant, active relationship with Him. It was in this physical world, that Joseph was called to serve God passionately with his whole being. He knew very well what God said in the book of Genesis when looking upon the world He created: "It is good." Consequently, Joseph recognized his personal responsibility to care for and enjoy that world. He would have been familiar with the Talmudic injunction (rabbinic commentary on Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures): "He who enjoys life does the will of God." He understood that failure to enjoy the gift of creation was an affront to the Creator.

Does this mean that Joseph and his first-century Jewish brethren were hedonists on a mad search for pleasure? In fact, just the opposite is true. "Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God" (Eccles. 2:24). Verses such as this were seen as clear instruction that enjoyment in the here and now comes from the hand of a loving Creator whose gifts should be met with gratitude, appreciation, and wonder. The *Jerusalem Talmud* says: "In the life to come each person will have to give account—of what?—of every good thing he might have enjoyed in this life but did not." Consequently, the rabbis said, *not to enjoy every legitimate pleasure provided by God was to display presumptive ingratitude.* As a member of that dynamic first-century Jewish community, Joseph would have embraced all that life had to offer as gifts from his divine Creator—with joy and thankfulness.



Another first-century belief that would have affected Joseph's thinking was that every blessing brings with it a responsibility. So not only would he have believed it a requirement to enjoy the world, but he also would have felt the obligation to care for it. In today's Judaism, the concept is called *tikun olam*—to sanctify the profane or to perfect the world. Joseph would have worked to make contributions to his community that would have lasting, positive impact. It was his responsibility, and yet an opportunity, to bring blessing to his Creator. As a father, Joseph would have been to Yeshua a living example of what Paul would later write to the Corinthians: *"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God"* (1 Cor. 10:31).



## Joseph's Self Image

As a Hebraic thinker, Joseph did not view his existence in segments, as do most Western thinkers today. We tend to separate the spiritual from the temporal, the religious from the secular, the body from the soul and from the spirit. Not Joseph. He saw his life, his relationships with God, his family and his community, his spirit, soul, and body...all as one interconnected whole that could not be separated. Dr. Marvin Wilson calls it "dynamic unity," the vibrant oneness of Hebraic existence. As Dr. Wilson says, the first-century Jew did not *have* a soul, he *was* a soul.



## Marriage Responsibility

In Joseph's world, marriage was seen as a religious responsibility based on the first commandment found in Genesis 1:28—*"Be fruitful and multiply."* The *Talmud* teaches that the unmarried person lives without joy, without blessing, without good. An unmarried man, the sages say, is not a man in the full sense, since it is written, "Male and female created He them and blessed them and called their name man." Judaism to this day holds to the belief that a full revelation of God only happens when the attributes of God found in man are united with the attributes of God found in woman. The purpose of marriage, therefore, has always been to present a complete picture of God to the world.

Throughout the centuries, many have taught that God's purpose for the marriage relationship was procreation and procreation only. The belief was that filling the earth, so that it could be subdued by humans, was the key role that man and woman were to play in His plan. The concept of true godly love between a man and a woman was replaced with a utilitarian, and often authoritarian, structure that left little room for the profound and joyful relationship God had intended. This unfortunate perspective stems from the Greek belief that the body was inferior to the soul and the source of sin; marital pleasure was sinful; marriage was God's answer to a questionable relationship and was only valuable for reproduction. The concept of dynamic unity and the beauty of God's design for marriage were lost.

Certainly, procreation was an important aspect of the marriage relationship, but obviously God's purposes went beyond the propagation of the species. The *Torah* anticipated that marital intimacy would bring great pleasure and happiness to a couple, and Judaism further provided that a woman's sexual pleasure was the responsibility of her husband. If he was not attending to this responsibility to her liking, she was within her rights to complain to their rabbi and seek his assistance in dealing with the issue with her husband. The establishment of marital relations was so important that a newly married man could not be inducted into the army for one full year after his wedding (Deut.24:5). Clearly, the intent was to create strong, healthy unions between two people who were committed to one another and to God for the primary purpose of revealing His character. To Joseph, the equation was a simple one: himself + Mary + children = a full picture of the nature of God and His dealings with His children.

*The purpose of marriage is to present a complete picture of God to the world.*

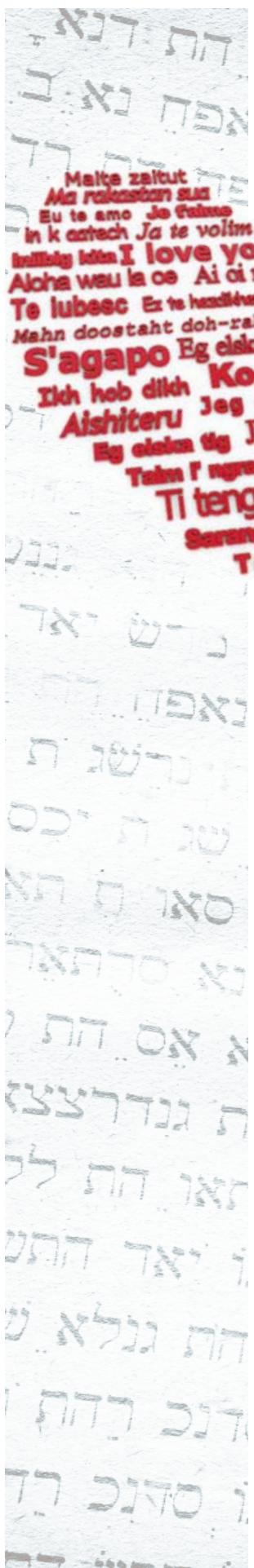
## What about *Love*?

Love is probably the most overused and least understood word in the English language. From magazine covers to movie screens, popular music to personal conversations, the word is used to mean anything from a simple personal preference (“I just love chocolate milk.”) to what amounts to ill will (“I would love it if he fell off a bridge.”) and everything in between. In advertising and entertainment, the word is synonymous with sexual promiscuity. Even very young children talk of falling in and out of love with classmates at nursery school. Entire books have been written on when to use the “L” word in a relationship, with caution not to be swept into an emotional admission that would “frighten your partner away.” Everywhere you look, “love” is in the air. Unfortunately, it is much more likely being used to sell something than it is to express the true depth of emotion and commitment that Joseph would have recognized in the word.

In his world, the concept of falling in and out of love, while looking for Ms. Right was unheard of. His marriage to Miriam was more than likely arranged by their parents. Sometimes, marriage partnerships were determined by families before children were even born. However, this was not the norm, since Judaism allowed that a woman could not be pledged in marriage without her willing consent. But, if families lived long distances apart, the bride and groom sometimes met each other for the first time when they gathered to seal their betrothal. Consequently, over the centuries, many teachers have likened the ancient Hebrew marriage relationship to that of the Greeks: loveless and difficult, dominated by authoritarian men who viewed their wives only as a necessary means of producing sons.

But we know that this cannot be the case. If the purpose of marriage was to reflect the character of God, it would have to be filled with the same faithful, generous, covenant love that defines Him. This was, in fact, the Hebraic ideal. But that love was not characterized by the lust, capriciousness, or cynicism that marks today’s definition. Commitment was the critical issue. Joseph and Mary each entered their union with total allegiance to the Lord and to each other. They understood that marriage came first and *then* came love—a love that was more than a feeling of fondness but a decision, a pledge and not a warm fuzzy, a commitment that developed into an emotional bond and included romantic love and deep affection.

The two people that would parent Yeshua knew that their marriage was a covenant, not to be broken. They knew that a successful marriage required dedication, effort and energy. Their culture and their role models taught them that there is very little in the universe that compares to the joy that is to be experienced by a husband and wife as they build a godly life together.



The success of the family was such an important issue in Jewish history that the sages dedicated a tremendous amount of time to it, encompassing the whole body of teaching under the heading “*Shalom Beit*”. Men were taught how to be good husbands in detail, with great emphasis on how to be kind and generous with their wives. The *Talmud* taught that the absence of love in parents would react negatively upon the character of the offspring. Further, it commended men who loved their wives more than themselves and taught that a good husband was willing to go without new clothes for himself so that he could buy attractive clothing for his wife. A tall husband was enjoined to stoop, so that he could hear the whispers of his wife, and the rabbis taught that “all things can be replaced except the wife of one’s youth.” The principle of *shalom beit* demanded that voices never be raised within the home, and the proof of one’s fulfillment of the commandment to love one’s neighbor was whether or not one’s spouse felt loved.

## One Puzzle, Three Pieces

Another Jewish concept relating to marriage that has its roots in the ancient world is that of the “soul mate.” In later years, the rabbis would expand upon it, and in Yiddish, it would become known as *bashert* or “perfect match.” Here, even though marriages might have been arranged by parents, God is really the matchmaker; He is the one that has determined who should marry whom. As a matter of fact, He actually creates men and women like puzzle pieces, designed specifically for one another. The perfect marriage relationship in this paradigm is made up of two people who have been custom built to be together...with God as the center piece, holding the other two pieces in place.

This concept did not promise a relationship with no difficulties. In fact, it made each partner even more accountable to work hard at building a strong, joyful partnership. With God at the center, failure is not an option. So, the sages said, as a single man commits his ways to the Lord, he will be lead to his soul mate, the one for whom he was created. Divorces result because marriages are entered into hastily, without patiently waiting for the Holy One to reveal *bashert*. Although Joseph would not have known the word in Yiddish, he would certainly have known the concept.

Joseph undoubtedly heard his father Jacob say, “A man should ever be careful about the honor due his wife because NO blessing is experienced in his house except on her account.” Miriam most certainly learned from her mother that the relationship she was entering was to be built on partnership and respect. She would have understood that what we today understand as the term “help meet” from the book of Genesis (2:18, KJV) actually meant “force equal to” and recognized her responsibility to be an equal partner with Joseph, each with distinct and critically important roles to play in the building of a godly union.

This concept of mutual love and respect is not only biblical but is also found in the *Talmud*: “Among those whose life is not a life at all is the man who is ruled by his wife.” Clearly, partnership, mutual esteem and shared values, together with a joint commitment to God and His *Torah*, were the foundation stones upon which a strong and healthy marriage was built. Joseph would have recognized Miriam as his *bashert*—a person of dignity, his equal, his partner in every way—accepting his role as her provider, pledging to support her and to bring her joy.

As the couple who would love and nurture Yeshua from birth to adulthood, Joseph and Miriam would have to have a relationship of strength and unity, based on love and respect for one another and commitment to the God who had chosen them for this incredible task. Surely they would have both come from families who had taught them well. Although the Scriptures tell us a little more about Miriam than Joseph,

"All things  
can be  
replaced  
except  
the wife  
of one's  
youth."

-Talmud



Yeshua's  
parents  
knew  
that their  
marriage  
was a  
covenant,  
not to be  
broken.



the responsibility of providing for, loving and protecting her and their remarkable son fell squarely on Joseph's shoulders. He was the man God chose to be a father in His stead. He would have been a man equal to the task. Today, when all too often, love means sex, marriage has little to do with commitment, and over 60% of children have been effected by divorce, Joseph with his dedication to the God of his fathers stands as a man to be emulated.

By Rev. Cheryl Hauer  
International Development Director

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

**M**any pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3).

