

HUSBAND FATHER WORKER

*Questions and Answers
About Saint Joseph*

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Authors' Note

The original material of this book was published in Brazil as *100 Questões de Josefologia* by Father José Antonio Bertolin, OSJ, in 1999. Father Larry Toschi, OSJ, then translated, adapted, and supplemented this material, publishing a few questions each quarter under the title “Josephology 1A” in *Guardian of the Redeemer* magazine beginning in September 2000. Finally, Rick Sarkisian, PhD, reorganized and abridged the material, put it into a colloquial format, and further supplemented it with extensive practical applications, with the editorial collaboration of Father Toschi.

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Foreword

The husband of Mary and the chosen father of Jesus, Saint Joseph, is at the heart of the Holy Family and, indeed, the story of salvation itself. Churches and cathedrals have been named for him. Countless congregations, institutes, and societies profess a devotion to him. Indeed, Joseph is beloved and venerated by believers all around the world—certainly by me and, I hope, by you!

I wonder, though, how much do we really know about him?

The Bible portrays Joseph as a rugged, down-to-earth, hard-working man who was very involved in the day-to-day life of his family and his world.

It is my hope that every question and answer in this book will draw you closer to Joseph in your everyday life and help you understand the virtues that make him worthy of devotion while equipping you to demonstrate those virtues wherever God calls you in the home, the church, the workplace, and the world.

Join Father José Antonio Bertolin, Father Larry Toschi from the Oblates of Saint Joseph (my cousin), and me as we embark on the path of discovering who Saint Joseph is and the role he can play in our lives today.

RICK SARKISIAN, PhD

Introduction

Most of us have only seen Saint Joseph in sacred art. While that makes it easier for us to grow in devotion to him, it also makes it hard to expand our thinking about Joseph, to think of him as a *real* person—a flesh-and-blood craftsman from Nazareth who experienced the same fears and joys we all face in our lives.

Q Why should we be interested in Joseph? After all, he's totally silent in Scripture.

A That's true. There are no words of Joseph recorded in Scripture, yet his silent life speaks volumes about love, obedience, integrity, and the value of good work.

Q Why should I pray to Joseph when I can go directly to Jesus?

A The saints—those holy ones who have already arrived at their heavenly home—offer a direct link to the merciful love of God. When asking for their help, we ask their intercession and entrust our needs to them. Just as we pray for the needs of those we know and love, Joseph will do the same for us as we seek his constant care.

CHAPTER ONE



Everyday Life in the Time of Joseph

Q What does the name “Joseph” mean?

A In biblical times, names were a lot more important than they are today, often describing the person’s character or destiny. So it’s significant that the name “Joseph” means “Yahweh increases” or “Yahweh makes grow.” This is from the Latin *Ioseph(us)* and from the Hebrew (*Iehôséph*).

In Genesis 30:22–24, Jacob’s wife, Rachel, gives her baby the name “Joseph” to recognize that God added to her the blessing of this son. Genesis 49:22 of the Vulgate reads: *Filius accrescens Ioseph*, “Joseph is a growing son,” or “Joseph is a fruitful bough.” Prior to the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, this reading was used for the Votive Mass of Saint Joseph on Wednesdays to convey that, just as the Old Testament patriarch, Joseph, was blessed in his descendants, so, too, was Saint Joseph blessed by being chosen as father to Jesus, the fruit of Mary’s womb.

Q What was the geography of Israel when Joseph was born?

A Joseph was born in Palestine, where the country of Israel is located today, east of the Mediterranean Sea on a stretch of land about 150 miles by ninety miles. While this is a fertile area, it is also marked by desolate deserts and rocky hills ranging from 1,600 to 3,000 feet in elevation, running through regions known as Galilee, Samaria, and Judea.

In Joseph's time, just as today, the Sea of Galilee was of major importance. Fourteen miles long, seven miles wide, and 150 feet deep, it was one of the principal centers of life for Joseph's people, mainly for fishing.

The Jordan River was also important, winding more than 200 miles before emptying into the Dead Sea. The water is so salty it supports no type of life. Thus its name, "Dead" Sea.

Q What was the political landscape like during Joseph's time?

A Joseph's birthplace, in what is now Israel, was a showcase for Roman progress and innovation, with many majestic and beautiful buildings. However, his people had lived under servitude to Rome since 63 BC, with little possibility of advancing. Herod was the local commander, appointed by the Roman Empire in 46 BC. Although he was an able administrator and astute politician, he cruelly killed anyone who opposed his power.

The strange customs of the Romans were at odds with the aspirations of Joseph's people. Their long history was marked by conflicts, victories, defeats, deportations, exiles, monarchies, and unfaithfulness to God. Faith in God was always present, although it was frequently contaminated by idolatry. There was an enormous desire for liberation from foreign domination.

Q What other issues impacted his society?

A Since the Hebrews were under Roman domination, the majority were poor, except for a small minority who belonged to the privileged class. Their poverty was further compounded by the high tax burden imposed by the Roman Empire on each citizen. The dominant class cruelly exploited a people already suffering crushing poverty. The poor, unproductive soil, scarcity of rain, and primitive agricultural methods made it harder to produce crops, so it was not easy for Joseph's people to sustain themselves.

Q What were the religious practices like in the time of Joseph?

A The entire religious life, as well as the political and social life of the Jewish people, revolved around the Temple in Jerusalem. King Solomon had built this impressive structure more than 1,000 years before Joseph was born. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it, and Zerubbabel rebuilt it by 515 BC. Around the time of Joseph's birth, Herod again destroyed the Temple so that he could replace it with an even more exquisite and imposing one, which was completed by AD 64.

The Temple was the place where the Jews prayed and offered sacrifices and burnt offerings. Because of its importance and the constant flow of people attending it, the Temple employed more than 20,000 people to maintain its activities. Their employees ranged from the highest priestly rank to the humblest laborer. Each Hebrew was taxed ten percent of whatever he produced in order to support all that happened at the Temple.

Another important factor in Jewish religious life was the division of the people into groups or classes. The Sadducees were a privileged group, formed from the richest and most influential people, who usually served as the Temple administrators. The Pharisees came next and were characterized by their religious display and practices of prayer, purifications, rules of conduct, and strict observance of the law. The Zealots were a warlike group of revolutionaries, while the

Essenes lived an austere life of self-denial in monastic communities bordering the Dead Sea. Finally, the Samaritans were declared heretical and impure pagans who dared to construct their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The region of Samaria was also considered to be cursed land because of a centuries-old division among the Hebrews.

Q Did men and women share equal status in Joseph's culture?

A No. Women were considered inferior to men and enjoyed no real social standing. Their role was to cook, wash clothes, fetch water, and dedicate themselves to cleaning. They did not participate in functions at the synagogues, and they took their place behind the men when they went to the Temple. They were not permitted to read the Torah in the Temple, a woman's testimony could never be taken into consideration, and no reputable man could ever compliment a woman in public.

Q What was Joseph's life like at home?

A Joseph probably lived in a modest house, simply constructed of limestone and sun-baked bricks. His main food would have been bread and fish from the Sea of Galilee, not far from his Nazareth home, and he most likely ate locally grown fruits, such as pomegranates, figs, and dates. Meat was very rare in the homes of those with less means, so he probably did not eat meat, but there most likely was olive oil or milk and even wine.

Q What can we learn from the Holy Family's simple life?

A In the simplicity of his life, Joseph found the profound. In the ordinary events of life in Nazareth, he found the mystery of God. Joseph had less distraction, so he was free to fully love Jesus and Mary, support his family, study Scripture, and to worship and obey God.

Q Can Joseph help me live like he did?

A Joseph is one of the all-time great examples of obedience. Just think about how he responded when he was told to leave immediately for Egypt: He went! He didn't complain or drag his feet. He responded to God's will and obeyed.

Some say that obediently serving someone, even God, detracts from our freedom. Actually, it's just the opposite. Serving God is an expression of our free will, something we freely choose to do, because there's no greater peace or fulfillment in life than serving God through prayer, worship, and in our relationships with others.

The more obedient we become to God's will, the more we want to grow in this key virtue that Joseph modeled so beautifully.