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## ST JOSEPH AS PREFIGURED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND HIS ROLE IN THE REDEMPTIVE MYSTERY OF GOD

Joy Philip Kakkanattu, CMI♦

### Abstract

St Joseph is portrayed in the Bible with a theologically rich and pregnant word righteous (*dikaïos* in Greek, and *zaddiq* in Hebrew). However, the nuances of this word are very profound and rich as is demonstrated from the life of St Joseph. St Joseph in his quality of *zaddiq* is prefigured in Biblical characters like Noah, Patriarch Joseph. There is also the possibility of tracing thematic foreshadowing of St. Joseph like Abraham's faith, Moses' risk-taking attitude, Ark of the Covenant, prophet as sentinel etc. St Joseph in the line of these foreshadowed personalities and themes plays an important role in the redemptive or salvific mystery of God as the foster-father of Jesus.

**Keywords:** Faith; Foreshadowing; Righteousness; St. Joseph; *Zaddiq*

### Introduction

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♦**Joy Philip Kakkanattu, CMI**, born in Kerala, India, belongs to the Congregation of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) holds a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture from Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, and a Doctorate in Theology with specialisation in Biblical Theology from Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. He is a resident professor at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, for the last 15 years, where he served also as the Dean of Faculty of Theology. At present, he serves as the President of the Catholic Biblical Association of India (CBAI). He has been a visiting faculty at JDV, Pune; Samanvaya Theology College, Bhopal; Kristujyothi College, Bangalore, Indian Institute Spirituality, Bangalore, etc. He has authored books and articles in the area of OT biblical studies. His doctoral thesis was published by Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, titled *God's Enduring Love in the Book of Hosea. A Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis of Hosea 11,1-11*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe 14, 2006. He teaches subjects in Old Testament such as Prophetic Literature, Psalms, Wisdom Literature, Prayer in the Bible, and Biblical Hebrew. Email: jpkakkanttu@gmail.com.

The description of St Joseph in the Bible is very brief when compared to the role he plays as the husband of Mary, the mother of the Messiah, and as the foster father of Jesus, the son of God. He is presented as a father in the shadows and as a silent husband who was unwilling to expose his wife to shame (Mt 1:19). However, the deft and incisive portrayal of his personality and the dynamics of his silent movements, especially in moments of unprecedented threat to the lives of his wife and child, is, in fact, a significant message in the Gospels. Through his silent demeanour, Joseph not only opens a new way of being but qualifies to be called one of the finest personalities depicted by the Biblical writers.

The gospel of Matthew, in introducing Joseph, uses one word to portray his personality. The word is *dikaios*, usually rendered in English as “just” or “righteous” (Mt 1:19). However, when used to delineate the character of a person, the more specific rendering would be ‘righteous’, as it is more comprehensive in expressing all possible ethically correct relationalities. The Hebrew equivalent of this word is *zaddiq*. *Zaddiq* is used to express the relational qualities of both God and human beings. People can hope to be forgiven and reestablished in their relationship with God because He is *zaddiq*. Even God’s punishment is associated with His quality of being *zaddiq*, because He punishes not to destroy but enable a person to repent (Zeph 3:5).<sup>1</sup> When the expression is used to describe a person, it expresses the person’s attitude in his relation to God and towards others. It is used for persons to sum up their whole life when lived according to the Sacred Scripture.<sup>2</sup> In general, to be *zaddiq* is to be right with God, loyal to divine command and intention.

Very rarely does the Bible provide the divine rationale for selecting a human being to fulfil God’s purpose. The selected person is considered righteous when he accepts God’s will in his life implicitly. It is this quality of *zaddiq* that emerged in Joseph when he found Mary, his betrothed, to be pregnant. “...Being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, he planned to send her away secretly” (Mt 1:19). But when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and explained the Virgin-birth as a part of God’s plan for our salvation, he accepted Mary as his wife, with implicit faith in the will

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<sup>1</sup>H. Ringgren and B. Johnson, “zadaq,” *TDOT* 12: 257.

<sup>2</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The infancy Narratives*, New York: Image, 2012, 19.

of God in his life. Joseph, as *dikaïos* (*zaddiq*), belongs to the line of some of the righteous people in the Old Testament.

In this essay, I attempt to find the prefiguration of Joseph based on his quality of being *zaddiq*. His ability to understand God's will from a dream is also considered in finding possible prefiguration in the OT. There are a few figures said to *be zaddiq* in the OT. Though the word *zaddiq* is not used explicitly to qualify some others, related words like *tam*, i.e., blameless or *yashar*, i.e., upright (cfr. Gen 17:1; Jb 1:1) are used to characterize their lives.

### **1. Noah, the *Zaddiq* – A Prefiguration of Joseph, the *Zaddiq***

With the quality of *zaddiq*, Noah remained a loner in the rampant and all-encompassing wickedness of humanity. The Bible says, "Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:8-9). Noah is a *zaddiq* and in that sense, he is blameless (*tam*) and has a close relationship with God. The *zaddiq* Noah saved the world from annihilation. He became the herald of a new beginning after the cleansing of the evil of humanity through a flood. This Noah achieved through a total adherence to God's plan. This obedience of righteous Noah is highlighted as a refrain: He . . . did all that God commanded him (6:22). Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him (7:5). Noah regards God's commands as promises of life.<sup>3</sup> 'By faith, Noah being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark....' (Heb 11:7).

Noah prefigures Joseph in various ways in his righteous attitude of collaborating with the divine intent. Just as Noah the *zaddiq* found grace with God and was chosen to save the world from total annihilation, so too Joseph the *zaddiq* found grace with God and chosen to save Jesus and Mary from Herod's fury. As Noah became the herald of a new beginning through his obedience to God's plans, Joseph became the herald of the coming of the Saviour by being obedient to God's plan revealed to him in a dream. What enabled God to take such a risk was the quality of Joseph and Noah—they were *zaddiq*, with the quality of being open to the divine designs to be worked out through them.

### **2. Patriarch Joseph: A Prefiguration of Joseph**

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<sup>3</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, 80.

In Patriarch Joseph, we can identify many qualities of Joseph, especially in his ability to adhere to God's designs even in adverse situations and in facilitating the safe-keeping of his family.

The attitude of Patriarch Joseph who deals with his brothers with compassion foreshadows Joseph's attitude towards Mary in not causing her any disgrace through retaliatory measures.

In common parlance, a righteous person is one who is upright morally and legally in his or her relationship with others. Such righteousness may enable a person to become altruistic enough to sacrifice one's self-interests to help others in difficulty. It is the quality that makes one available to help others grow, to help others come out of the shadows of life, to help others live in a more dignified manner. However, in the Bible, righteousness is defined significantly as right standing with God. Paul describes it as faith-obedience in the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Hebrews, providing a long list of people from the Old Testament times who obeyed God implicitly. Such obedience comes from an implicit faith in "The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:2).

St Joseph had altruism as a *zaddiq* who does not permit the other to have any difficulty because of his words or deeds. It would have been rather easy for him to defame Mary by making the news of her pregnancy public. He could have won the credit of a legally right person by taking her to the Sanhedrin to be prosecuted and eventually stoned publicly for the act of adultery. Adultery also provided a solid reason for St Joseph to write a bill of divorce and dissolve his betrothal with Mary. However, it would mean exposing Mary, suspected of adultery, to be led in shame by the procedure indicated to punish the guilty person in the case of adultery. It would have been the easiest way to prove himself 'self-righteous and upright'. But he interpreted the law as a commandment of love and contemplated to dismiss Mary silently and thus causing no uproar about her.<sup>4</sup> As Pope Francis puts it, "He chose the path of confidentiality, without a trial or retaliation."<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI very aptly summarizes these perspectives when he writes,

After the discovery that Joseph made, his task was to interpret and apply the law correctly. He does so with love: he does not want to give Mary up to public shame, He wishes her well even in the hour of his great

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<sup>4</sup>Ulrich Luz, *Mathew 1-7: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 114.

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/pa-pa-francesco\\_20211201\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/pa-pa-francesco_20211201_udienza-generale.html), accessed 05.12.2021.

disappointment. He does not embody the form of externalized legalism that Jesus denounces in Mt 23 and that Paul opposes so strenuously. He lives the law as Gospel. He seeks the path that brings law and love into a unity.<sup>6</sup>

St Joseph's keen sense of righteousness is manifest in his intention to be charitable towards Mary – no defamation: that is, his decision to refrain from maligning her name. To be charitable in words is a part of being righteous. This attention to the name and dignity of the other, even to one's disadvantage is the distinguishing mark of Joseph's righteousness. It is this quality of his character, "his unwillingness to expose her to public disgrace" that attracted the attention of God to deal with him in a dream. Because of this trait, Joseph would collaborate with any option which would help him in getting out of the dilemma without offending or disgracing Mary. Maybe because of his preoccupation with causing Mary no harm, even when the relationship is discontinued, he was open to any creative suggestions in saving Mary from shame. Being a *zaddiq*, St Joseph could perceive and discern the divine will in a dream. When one contemplates creatively and compassionately to help someone in physical or moral disarray, he/she gets the power to discern the positive value of dreams. Or I would say, only a righteous and optimistic person will have dreams of positive regard towards others. To a person, who is open to creative initiatives in seeking ways to save others, a meaningful dream may open a new way. It is a great thing to be able to dream of helping others. Pope Francis' words support this view: "God's voice intervenes in Joseph's discernment. In a dream, He reveals a greater meaning than his justice. How important it is for each one of us to cultivate a just life and, at the same time, to always feel the need for God's help to broaden our horizons and to consider the circumstances of life from an always different, larger perspective."<sup>7</sup> As Pope Benedict XVI writes, "Only a man who is inwardly watchful for the divine, only someone with a real sensitivity for God and his ways, can receive God's message in this way."<sup>8</sup>

What enabled St Joseph to recognize God's designs in dreams is the quality of a *zaddiq*, prefigured in Psalm One. Psalm One depicts a righteous person as one who "delights in the Law of the Lord," and meditates upon it day and night. He is like a tree, planted beside the

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<sup>6</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, New York: Image, 2012, 41.

<sup>7</sup>[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/pa-francesco\\_20211201\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/pa-francesco_20211201_udienza-generale.html), accessed 05.12.2021.

<sup>8</sup>Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, 41.

flowing waters, constantly bringing forth fruit. "The flowing waters, from which he draws nourishment, naturally refer to the living Word of God, into which he sinks the roots of his being. God's will is not a law imposed on him from without, it is 'joy.'" For him, the Word of God is simply the Gospel, good news because he reads it with a personal, loving openness to God and, in this way, learns to understand and live it from deep within."<sup>9</sup> It is this openness to God's designs that enabled Joseph to recognize the plan of God at various moments in his life, revealed to him in dreams. These designs were not easy and pleasant. Rather, following them would imply accepting a life of sacrifice and suffering: to accept a pregnant woman as his wife and to take care of her and her child is not easy for a man; to flee to a foreign land abandoning the security of the homeland, and after many years again to readjust to a new situation relying on dreams, demands immense faith and trust in God, as seen also in Abraham's life. Only those who can trust in the reliability of God's words would be able to forsake their comforts and rely totally on divine designs.

We can trace a foreshadowing also in the patriarch Joseph because he too could interpret dreams and discern the divine designs communicated through them.

## 2.1. Patriarch Joseph

Rabbinic literature interprets Joseph the Patriarch as *zaddiq*. It proclaims him as an example of *zaddiq*. Elie Wiesel explores the reasons for considering Joseph as *zaddiq*. One reason is that the *zaddiq* in him intervened in time to help him not to succumb "to an awakening of desire on his part" especially when he was alone with Potiphar's wife and her enticements.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, he remains a *zaddiq* in that, when he ascended the ladder of power in Egypt, the success did not go to his head. He remained devout and God-fearing and bound to honour the commandments. Even when he was crowned with success in interpreting dreams, rationed food etc. he never boasted. His modesty and humility were never at stake.<sup>11</sup> When we elaborate the idea of *zaddiq*, Joseph was regarded *zaddiq* in his relationship with other people, especially his brothers, his offenders. "Joseph had to overcome inner obstacles not in order to come closer to God, but to his fellowmen, to his own brothers. He had good

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<sup>9</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, 39.

<sup>10</sup>Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, New York: Pocket Books, 1977, 163.

<sup>11</sup>Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, 165.

reasons to repudiate them, to hate them, to drive them from his house and memory; for him, they represented a source of grief and evil.” Joseph proved to be *zaddiq* in his ability to forgive them without forgetting. In fact, Joseph forgave, without forgetting anything. He went to the extent of clarifying with his brothers that though he could remember everything they did to him, still he harboured no animosity towards them and took the initiative to talk to the fear-stricken brothers in a convincing manner so as to alleviate their fears of retaliation after the death of their father. Wiesel writes:

He reached his peak of achievement after Jacob's death. His brothers worried: As long as our father was alive, Joseph left us alone; now he will settle his accounts with us. To which Joseph replied: If ten candles did not succeed in extinguishing one lonely candle, how could one extinguish ten? Yes, he forgave, but he had forgotten nothing.

What does all this mean? That one is not born a *Tzaddiq*; one must strive to become one. And having become a *Tzaddiq*, one must strive to remain one.<sup>12</sup>

More astonishing is that besides forgiving, Joseph deciphered in all the evil he suffered, the salvific plan of God for him and his household. In all the vicissitudes of his life, Joseph never departed from his trust in God.

His sense of righteousness was such that, it enabled Joseph to speak the truth to his brothers without hatred or any intention to retaliate. He was in a position to do anything to them. But he looked for higher motives than the human in the hateful attitude of his brothers towards him. “But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?’<sup>20</sup> Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, to preserve numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.’ In this way he reassured them, speaking to their hearts” (Gen 50:19-21).

Thus, St Joseph’s attitude towards Mary, after his knowledge of her pregnancy is foreshadowed in Joseph’s forgiving attitude towards his brothers. A broader interpretation of justice, which opts for a conciliatory attitude towards the wronged ones, makes both the Josephs comparable. In this conciliatory attitude, they proved the validity of their name: ‘May God increase’. It means, trusting in God they converted all the vicissitudes of their lives for the good of those dependent on them. The comment of Pope Francis is noteworthy:

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<sup>12</sup>Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, 180-81.

“Indeed, this very name reveals to us an essential aspect of Joseph of Nazareth’s personality. He is a man full of faith, in his providence: he believes in God’s providence, he has faith in God’s providence. His every action, as recounted in the Gospel, is dictated by the certainty that God “gives growth”, that God “increases”, that God “adds”: that is, that God provides for the continuation of his plan of salvation. And in this, Joseph of Nazareth is very similar to Joseph of Egypt.”<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Thematic Foreshadowing of St Joseph

There is a possibility of finding a thematic foreshadowing of Joseph of the NT in the OT.

#### 3.1. Abraham’s Faith

In Abraham’s proactive response to the divine command, we see a prefiguration of Joseph’s positive response to the divine intent revealed to him in a dream:

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife... (Mt 1:20-24).

Just as Abraham believed in God and his words, so too Joseph. By responding positively to God’s invitation both Abraham and Joseph became participants in the divine plan of salvation for his people. Abraham became the father of all believers (cf. Rom 4:11-12, 16-17) and Joseph became the foster father of the Saviour of the world. In the great intercession of Abraham in Genesis 18, we see the role of righteous (*zaddiq*) persons in saving a city. In the dialogue between Abraham and God, we see that the smaller the number becomes – suppose forty ... thirty ... twenty ... are found there (Gen 18:29-32) – the greater God’s mercy is shown to be. As the number reduces, God patiently replies “I will spare ... I will not destroy ... I will not do it” (Gen 18:26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32). The search for a few righteous or at least one seems to have continued till it reaches Jesus Christ. God said to prophet Jeremiah:

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/papa-francesco\\_20211117\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20211117_udienza-generale.html), accessed on 05.12.2021.



Finally, when God himself decided to become that one righteous person to save the world. In this process Joseph the *zaddiq* became a partner with God. Pope Ratzinger puts it succinctly. "It was to be necessary for God himself to become that one righteous person. And this is the mystery of the incarnation: to guarantee a just person he himself becomes man. The infinite and surprising divine love was to be fully manifest when the Son of God was to become man, the definitive righteous One, the perfect Innocent who would bring salvation to the whole world by dying on the Cross, forgiving and interceding for those who "know not what they do" (Lk 23:24).<sup>14</sup>

Another possible foreshadowing of Joseph in the life of Abraham is the power of discernment of divine purpose for him communicated to him through a celestial voice. Relying on the authenticity of the celestial voice (Mt 1:20), Joseph accepted Mary as his wife (Mt 1:24); fled to Egypt to save the child from the brutality of Herod (Mt 2:13); returned to Nazareth eventually (Mt 2:19). Abraham left his security and his people trusting in the divine voice, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:1-2). Later, when the celestial voice came to him with a demand for the sacrifice of his son, Isaac, for the son of divine promise to be a holocaust, he complied without any argument. And, because of his promptness in saying, "Here am I" (Gen 22:11) to the divine voice, it came to him again saying "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now, I know that you fear God since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen 22:12). He could then withdraw the hand stretched out to slay his son. Commenting on the "Here am I (*hinneneni*) of Abraham, Elie Wiesel writes that it means to state, "I am the same, the same person who answered Your first call; I answer Your call, whatever its nature; and even were *it* to change, I would not."<sup>15</sup> Both Joseph of NT and Abraham became the interlocutors and facilitators of God's redemptive plan through their promptness to decipher the divine plan in the celestial voice that came to them. This promptness results from the solidity of their faith. In the Bible, faith means unconditional belief in the reliability of God as someone true to His promises. This trust enables both Joseph and

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<sup>14</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, *Prayer*, Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2013, 25.

<sup>15</sup>Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, 97.

Abraham, to endure darkness even when the exit is not in sight; to continue to rely on this God.

### 3.2. Moses, the Risk-Taking Leader of Israel

The Bible presents Moses as a national figure who led the people of Israel through many stages of their formation to become a national entity. Along with his powerful national leadership, he is portrayed as a man of *zaddiq* in all his feelings such as embitterment, disappointment, surrender, tragic frustration, courageous and charismatic take of an extraordinary chief who rises to the crises he encountered. To understand the ostensible traits of *zaddiq* in Moses, the man who led ancient Israel from the grip of Egyptian slavery, I try to analyse the episode of Crossing the Red Sea, a courageous move of Moses, the liberator. What is common in these two episodes is the exposition of the tenacity coupled with the approval of Yahweh. Moses, the tenacious leader of ancient Israel, becomes, with divine approval, a prefiguration of Joseph, the protector of new Israel.

#### 3.2.1. *Moses and the Crossing of the Red Sea: A Prefiguration of the Flights of St Joseph*

The crossing of the Red Sea in the life of Israel was, beyond question, a battle between life and death as the enemy, the Egyptian army, was behind them. It is interesting to note that Yahweh did not employ a superhuman army power to fight for his people on His behalf, as He would do later during the Babylonian exile (2 Chr 36:22-23). However, Yahweh ensured that Moses and his assistant and brother Aaron were sufficient to carry on the battle against the Egyptians. In the book of Genesis, Yahweh had a different strategy to put forward His message to the enemy. He directly communicated His mind to them through dreams (Gen 20:6-7; 41:1-7). But Moses acted as the mouth of Yahweh (Ex 10:3-6) and the hands of Yahweh (Ex 8:4-8; 9:28-33; 10:17-18).<sup>16</sup> If Moses' mouth signified the Word of Yahweh, his hands signified God's protection on them. If the old Israel were fed by the Words of Yahweh through the mouth of Moses, the new Israel was led by the silent yet eloquent presence of Joseph. The Biblical author presents Joseph as a silent man. The person, entrusted with the great responsibility of caring for the Son of

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<sup>16</sup> Charlie Trimm, "God's Staff and Moses' hands(s): The Battle Against the Amalekites as a Turning Point in the Role of the Divine Warrior," *JSOT* 44, 1 (2019): 198-214, 199.

God and His mother, remains silent throughout his entire mission. This is the Joseph Pope Francis projects when he describes the character of Joseph in the Polish Writer, Jan Dobraczynski's novel, *The Shadow of the Father*: "In his relationship to Jesus, Joseph was the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father; he watched over him and protected him, never leaving him to go his own way. We can think of Moses' words to Israel: "In the wilderness... you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you travelled" (Deut 1:31). Similarly, Joseph acted as a father for his whole life."<sup>17</sup> As St. John Paul II views, the silence of Joseph reveals the inner portrait of the man. Shrouded in silence as he was, Joseph, nevertheless, was in daily contact with the mystery which dwelt under his roof.<sup>18</sup> What is parallel to the crossing of the Red Sea in the formation of the old Israel is the flight to Egypt for the infant new Israel. Once again, God's command came to Joseph: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (Mt 2:13). And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Mt 2:14-15; cfr. Hos 11:1). The mention of "night" is significant. It is at midnight that the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt after instituting the first Passover and before departing from Egypt (Ex 12:29). Joseph, the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father to the new Israel, was attuned to the promptings of God. God communicated to him in the depth of his silence. When Herod died, God's message came once again to Joseph in Egypt: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead" (Mt 2:20). "And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel" (Mt 2:21). Joseph was also a man of practical wisdom. He is clear in both intention and action which makes him constantly vigilant to quicken his steps by heeding and yielding to the divine voice. While lacking

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<sup>17</sup>Pope Francis. *Patris Corde*, § 7, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap\\_20201208\\_patris-corde.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html), accessed 07.12.2021.

<sup>18</sup> Pope John Paul II, *apostolic exhortation Redemptoris Custos*, §25, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap\\_20201208\\_patris-corde.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html)[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_15081989\\_redemptoris-custos.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_15081989_redemptoris-custos.html), 07.12.2021.

the verbal brilliance, he is portrayed as a man with the dual perceptiveness of silence and insightfulness enough to devise escape to a safer zone for the child and the mother: “When he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father, Herod, he was afraid to go there and being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee” (Mt 2:22).

### 3.3. The Bearers of the Ark of the Covenant: A Prefiguration of Joseph, the Priest

In the book of Numbers, God gives Moses and Aaron specific instructions about the Tent of Meeting and the movement of the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25:12-14; Num 7: 4-5, 9). It is interesting to note that the service to the Tent of Meeting is to be done only by the Levites and the Ark of the Covenant is to be carried only by selected persons using the poles prescribed. For Israel, the Tent became their meeting place with God and it was carried from place to place as Israel moved (Ex 40:35-38). In the New Testament, Mary becomes that Tent of meeting in whose womb the Word became flesh; divinity embraced humanity. And Joseph is chosen to carry that New Tent of meeting, the New Ark of the Covenant, from place to place. In that sense, Joseph can be seen as an ideal priest into whose hands God entrusted the Ark of the Covenant.

There are some striking parallels between David bringing the Ark into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6:1-19 and the Gospel accounts of Joseph’s journey with Mary and Jesus:

2 Samuel 6:2: “David arose and went” to Judah	Mt 2:14, 21: “Joseph arose and took the child and his mother.”
2 Samuel 6:9-19: David was confused and fearful: “How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?” So, David was not willing to take the ark of the Lord...”	Mt 1:19: Joseph was confused by the pregnancy of Mary and resolved to send her away quietly.
2 Samuel 6:11: the Ark of the Covenant remained at the house of Obbedom for three months.	Mt 2:15: Joseph remained with Mary and Jesus (the new Tent and Ark of the Covenant) in Egypt until the

	death of Herod
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Unlike David, who danced before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6:14-22), Joseph, the bearer of the new Ark of the Covenant, remained unnoticed in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. Joseph, the bearer of the Ark of the Covenant, as Pope Francis notes, “reminds us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Joseph, the bearer of the Ark of the Covenant, becomes a challenge for the culture of image-overhaul at the cost of interiority and integrity that leads to justice and righteous living.

### **3.4 The Prophet as the Watchman of the Dawn: A Prefiguration of Joseph, the Prophet**

One of the narrative significances of the Biblical prophets is that they are metaphorically presented as sentinels or the watchmen of the dawn (Isa 21:6; 11-12; Ezek 3:17; Hos 9:8; Hab 2:1). The sentinel has twofold duties: First, in times of conflict and war, he is to sound the horn and warn the people the moment he perceives the advancement of the enemy, (Isa 21:6-8). If he fails here, he is to be held responsible for the life of the person who has been taken away. Second, he is to keep from danger the people entrusted to his care (Isa 62:1; Jer 31:6, 28). He needs to be ever-vigilant all through the night to announce the ushering in of the dawn.

The above analysis reveals that the prophet as a sentinel of the dawn stares into the distance and can perceive the impending advancement of the enemy. He can devise deterrent strategies to defend his people and he is to be vigilant all day and all night. He, like the God of Israel, does not slumber. These characteristics aptly fit into the personality of Joseph, the guardian and protector of Mary and Jesus. Like the sentinels of the dawn, he watched over Mary and Jesus. The Bible recounts that God communicated to him in his dreams and his attitude was of vigilance and his response was of immediate action (Mt 2:13-14; 19-23). His due diligence shows that he was not afraid to open his eyes to the seriousness of the situation. The role of the sentinel of the new dawn, qualifies Joseph not only to be a prophet but also as a pointer towards the need for fathers for our families to have the diligence of sentinels who keep their eyes and ears open for the wellbeing of their families.

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<sup>19</sup>Pope Francis, *Patris Corde*, Introductory note.

## Conclusion

Joseph, portrayed in the verses of the Gospel as a man of no words, is more eloquent in his message that it resonates through the breadth and length of the Bible. From the fact that he is described as a righteous person, we get to know the sense of commitment in his life that earned him the responsibility of being the “guardian of the mystery of God.”<sup>20</sup>

This paper is an attempt to read through the Biblical account of the life of St Joseph and to note the similarities with some specific characters of the OT who prefigured his righteousness in doing the will of God. Joseph the *zaddiq*, followed the footprints of Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses and many other great believers of the OT in discerning the divine plan revealed to him and thus becoming an active collaborator in salvation history. Joseph showed the face of God’s mercy in replacing justice with compassion. As the foster father of Jesus and the guardian of the Holy Family, he has shown us the heart of a loving father (*Patris Corde*).

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<sup>20</sup>Pope John Paul II. *Redemptoris Custos*, §5.