

Mary Dzon

(The University of British Columbia)

Joseph and the Amazing Christ-Child of Late-Medieval Legend

In both academic and popular discourses, the phrase “Holy Family” is commonly used to refer to the threesome of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. That medieval religious writers do not seem to have had an equivalent Latin expression does not necessarily mean that they did not think of these three persons as constituting a nuclear family or were uninterested in their interactions. While late-medieval culture emphasized the sufferings of Jesus and Mary at the foot of the cross and the intimacy between them during Christ’s infancy, writers and artists also presented Christ’s boyhood as an object of meditation for their audiences.¹ Since the canonical gospels did not provide them with details about this stage of Christ’s life, they had to exercise their ingenuity in imagining what he said or did as he was growing up.² For the most part, medieval clerics’ sense of propriety and penchant for didacticism governed their depictions of the boy Jesus. Behavior considered appropriate to medieval children was hypothetically attributed to the Christ-child under the assumption that he probably acted in such a way so as to give a good example to other children. It was unthinkable—at least for most medieval Christians—that a divine child would have ever been a naughty boy.

As Caroline Walker Bynum has noted, “Not every aspect of family life is depicted in artistic renderings of the Holy Family. There are . . . all sorts of childish actions that are not attributed to the baby God.” Bynum causes us to reflect upon this point by contrasting medieval iconography of the Christ-child with a shocking painting by the twentieth-century artist Max Ernst, which depicts the Virgin Mary

¹ In this volume, Albrecht Classen, Eva Parra Membrives and Marilyn Sandidge cite examples of conventional medieval images of Mary and Jesus, in which mother and child interact with each other like ordinary humans and Mary offers up her son to his heavenly Father.

² After recounting Christ’s nativity, the gospels of Matthew and Luke pass over the early stages of Christ’s life. Luke, however, briefly narrates an incident that occurred when Jesus was twelve and attests to Jesus’s childhood development (Lk. 2: 41–52).

spanking her son.³ While Bynum's statement makes particular reference to the infant Jesus, she would presumably extend her generalization to include the boy Jesus as well. Yet an exception must be made to her observation: a relatively small number of late-medieval texts and images, ultimately based upon apocryphal infancy gospels of the early Christian era, characterize the boy Jesus as a willful child who causes his parents difficulties. Simone Martini's fourteenth-century painting "The Holy Family," a representation of the incident recounted in the second chapter of Luke, in which Mary reproves her son for not telling his parents about his whereabouts, provides another exception to Bynum's generalization (fig. 1).⁴ The boy Jesus stands besides his parents, cross-armed and apparently annoyed at their inability to understand his divine vocation. Martini's painting demonstrates that apocryphal authors were not the only people who sensed the tension latent in Luke's narration of the finding of the child Jesus in the temple.⁵ In this essay, I will focus on the conflict and misunderstanding between the boy Jesus and his father Joseph as portrayed in a number of Middle English childhood of Jesus poems that are based upon apocryphal infancy legends. To provide a sense of the cultural context of these poems, I will first consider a selection of conventional devotional texts and images that seem to have been shaped by a sense of propriety and didacticism. I will then suggest that a desire to represent the challenges of everyday family life, which the standard iconography of the Holy Family tended to ignore, seems to have motivated the retelling of the childhood of Jesus legends in the later Middle Ages.

³ "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 79–117; here 80. As Bynum points out, the theological problem with the painting is that it suggests that "something is badly wrong between the supposedly sinless mother and her supposedly sinless son," 79–80. The boy's naughtiness is indicated by the fact that his halo has "fallen" onto the floor. For a reproduction of the painting, see *Fragmentation*, figure 3.1. When the painting was on display in Cologne in 1928, "The scandal reached such proportions that the archbishop himself proceeded to publicly excommunicate the painter before the faithful gathered in the cathedral, among whom was the artist's own father," *Ernst*, ed. Jose Maria Faerna, trans. Alberto Curotto (New York: Cameo/Abrams, 1997), 32. Ernst's picture of the Virgin spanking Jesus was possibly a response to his father's portrait of him as the Christ-child (*Max Enfant-Jesus*) to commemorate the time when he, as a boy, strayed from home and was brought back by the local police; see John Russell, *Max Ernst: Life and Works* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1960), 12–13. *Max Enfant-Jesus* is reproduced in Patrick Waldberg, *Max Ernst* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1958), 29.

⁴ This painting is also unusual in that it portrays the Holy Family in isolation from other people, rather than among the learned teachers in the temple where the twelve-year-old Jesus was found. For a discussion of the painting, see Don Denny, "Simone Martini's *The Holy Family*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1967): 138–49.

⁵ The thirteenth-century Anglo-Latin poet Walter of Wimborne is another person who sensed conflict in this biblical scene. In one of his devotional poems, the narrator becomes Mary's lawyer and accuses the boy Jesus of impiety. See my article "Conflicting Notions of *Pietas* in Walter of Wimborne's *Marie Carmina*," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 15 (2005), forthcoming.



Figure 1: Simone Martini, "The Holy Family," reproduced with the permission of National Museums Liverpool (The Walker)

To the extent to which medieval religious iconography idealizes the interactions between Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it may be said to engage in the construction of a "Holy Family romance."⁶ The Middle English childhood of Jesus poems, in contrast, do not idealize the family life of Jesus. Their emphasis upon the tension between father and son was probably aimed at humanizing the Holy Family, and, paradoxically, at reasserting the supernatural origin of Christ, as I will explain below.⁷ As foster-father of a child who possesses miraculous powers and operates according to divine mandates, Joseph of the legends is in a unique situation. Yet insofar as he has to deal with a troublesome child, Joseph is a character whom a late-medieval audience could relate to, a parent like themselves.⁸

The pious imagination can be seen at work in a sermon by the Dominican friar Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419), who attempts to illustrate Luke's statement that Jesus "went down with them [his parents], and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them. . . . And Jesus advanced in wisdom, and age, and grace with God and men."⁹ Ferrer invites us to imagine the following scenario. One morning, when the Virgin was getting ready to fetch water, Joseph told her that he would go instead. The Christ-child then entered this dispute as a third party: "Cum autem sic pie contenderent Virgo et Joseph, veniebat Christus, et recipiebat amphoram, dicens,

⁶ Sarah Beckwith has used this expression in her discussion of Margery Kempe's fantasies of familial intimacy with Christ, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville, Tallahassee, et al.: University Press of Florida, 1996), 195–215; here 205; and *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 86. See also the study by Daniel F. Pigg in the present volume. In discussing the Madonna and child images of the later Middle Ages, Philippe Ariès used the phrase "sentimental realism" to describe how they portray Jesus and Mary interacting like ordinary human mothers and children, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 36. In my view, this phrase is somewhat of a contradiction in terms. Charming images that "stress the graceful, affectionate, naive aspects of early childhood" are not completely humanistic since they, unlike the infancy legends, exclude the depiction of any kind of friction between mother and child. Although scholars have interpreted Ariès' thesis as advocating a discovery of childhood in the post-medieval period, his discussion of late-medieval depictions of the child Jesus suggests that a greater awareness and appreciation of childhood than obtained in the earlier medieval period gradually emerged at the end of the Middle Ages.

⁷ Johan Huizinga remarks that the later Middle Ages took the humanization of Joseph too far: "[the veneration of saints] moves along with the stream of everyday thought and occasionally loses its dignity in this stream. The medieval veneration of Joseph is a case in point," *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 193.

⁸ Steven M. Taylor similarly argues for the didactic function of the apocryphal infancy legends appearing in French literature, but he downplays the naughtiness attributed to the child Jesus in his sources. See "Heavenly Humility: The Holy Family as Role Model for Parents and Children in Medieval French Literature," *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 28 (1980): 45–59.

⁹ I cite here the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible. The passage which follows is taken from *Sancti Vincentii Ferrari. . . Opera omnia*, Vol. 1 (Valencia, 1693), 293. I am very grateful to Professor Pedro M. Cátedra of the University of Salamanca for providing me with this text.

'Ego ibo'" ["in the midst of their kindly contention, Jesus came in, took up the pitcher and said, 'I will go'"]. Joseph commanded him deferentially not to go, "O Domine, vos non ibitis" ["Lord, you shall not go"]. But Christ replied, "ibo, vt dem exemplum aliis filiis" ["I will go in order to set a good example for other children"]. Ferrer proceeds to imagine what Jesus would have said if someone, upon his return, had asked him why he did this. He has the boy reply, "vt quando filii Christianorum audient hoc servitium quod ego facio parentibus meis, huiusmodi exemplo ipsi seruiant, et ministrent parentibus suis" ["so that when Christian children hear about the service I perform for my parents, they themselves will serve and minister to their parents after my example"]. Ferrer's use of the adverb "pie" to describe how Mary and Joseph disagree with one another is probably intended to forestall his audience's objection to the idea of conflict existing within the Holy Family. To commend the family members' mutual desire to serve one another, he quotes the adult Christ's saying that he "came not to be served, but to serve" (Mt. 20:28).

The legend about the Christ-child drawing water from a well also appears in other medieval religious texts. Throughout his *Historia scholastica* (ca. 1170) Peter Comestor includes various legends pertaining to the biblical narrative, yet on the topic of Christ's childhood he mentions only the temple incident recounted by Luke.¹⁰ An additional remark found in some manuscripts, however, calls attention to a historical landmark associated with the boy Jesus: "Dicitur ibi fons esse parvus, de quo puer Jesus hauriebat, et ministrabat matri, dum subditus erat" ["There is said to be a small fountain there from which the boy Jesus drew water in the service of his mother, when he was subject to her"].¹¹ In his *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, the fourteenth-century Franciscan Johannes de Caulibus similarly notes that "Dicitur. . . et uerisimile est quod adhuc est ibi fons de quo puer Iesus deferebat aquam matri" ["it is said and is probably true, that to this day you can see the well from which the boy Jesus fetched water for his mother"].¹² Despite his

¹⁰ "Porro de infantia Salvatoris, et operibus eius usque ad baptismum, non legitur in Evangelio nisi quod Lucas dicit duodennem remansisse in Jerusalem, et post triduum inventum a parentibus in medio doctorum audientem, et interrogantem eos" ["but concerning his infancy and his deeds up until his baptism, nothing is mentioned in the gospel except that Luke says that he remained in Jerusalem when he was twelve, and after three days was found by his parents amidst the teachers, listening to them and questioning them"], *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, Vol. 198, cols. 1549c-d. This statement may possibly suggest a refusal on Comestor's part to acknowledge the validity of certain legends he has read in a book called *the Infantia Salvatoris*.

¹¹ PL 198, col. 1550a, additio. Vincent Ferrer notes that Comestor "expresse dicit, quod Christus cum aliis pueris ibat ad portandum aquam de fonte" [expressly says that Christ went with other children to draw water from a well"], *Opera omnia*, 293.

¹² *Meditaciones vite Christi*, ed. M. Stallings-Taney. Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, 153 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 59. I cite the English translation by Francis X. Taney, Anne Miller and C. Mary Stallings-Taney (Asheville, North Carolina: Pegasus Press, 2000), 52. As Taney, Miller and Stallings-Taney point out, scholars are not completely certain that Johannes de

uncertainty about this detail, Johannes presumably includes it because it demonstrates the exemplary piety of the boy Jesus and the poverty of the Holy Family. He remarks that "Faciebat enim huiusmodi seruicia matri humilis Dominus: non enim habebat alium seruientem" ["Our humble Lord was accustomed to perform services of this type for his mother. She had no one else to help her"].¹³ Johannes then describes what Jesus did between the ages of twelve and thirty: he went to the synagogue to pray, stayed at home with his mother, and sometimes helped his foster-father.¹⁴

St. Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373) similarly notes that the boy Jesus performed manual labor: in her *Revelations*, the Virgin Mary tells her that when the Holy Family returned from the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus "trauailed with his handes onest werkes. . . and he talde vs mani comfortabill wordes. . . he gafe vs no gold bot ai stird vs to paciens" ["did honest work with his hands. . . and he told us many comforting words. . . he gave us no gold but always inspired us to be patient"].¹⁵ The Anglo-Norman *Holkham Bible Picture Book* likewise depicts Jesus doing chores for his parents: besides drawing water from a well, he blows a fire and serves his parents at table.¹⁶ Similarly, in the rule he wrote for a female recluse, the Cistercian abbot Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1166) tells his reader that "hit schal be non harm to þe alþou₃ þu be-þenke þe how þy 3unge husbonde Crist, while he was child, childly and myryli pleyde hym among oþer children at Nazareth, and oþer-whyle hou seruisable he was to his moder, and anoþer tyme how swete and gracious he was to his nursche" ["it shall not be harmful to you to think how your young husband Christ, when he was a child, merrily played like a child with other children at Nazareth, and how he was sometimes helpful to his mother, and sometimes sweet and gracious to his foster-father"].¹⁷

Caulibus is the name of the author of the *Meditaciones*, xiii-xiv. On the date of the text, see Sarah McNamer, "Further Evidence for the Date of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditaciones Vitae Christi*," *Franciscan Studies*, new series, 50 (1990): 235-61.

¹³ *Meditaciones*, 59. *Meditations*, 52.

¹⁴ *Meditaciones*, 65. *Meditations*, 56. One of the illustrations in an Italian manuscript of the *Meditaciones* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS Ital. 115) portrays Jesus serving his parents at table. See the translation by Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green, *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 84, illustration 74. For a study of the iconography of this manuscript, see Stephen M. Wagner, *Embracing Convent Life through Illustrations of the Holy Family in a Fourteenth Century Italian Translation of the Meditations on the Life of Christ* (M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 1995).

¹⁵ *The Liber Celestis of St. Bridget of Sweden*, ed. Roger Ellis, Early English Text Society, original series 291 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 447. For the original Latin text, see *Sancta Birgitta Revelaciones: Book VI*, ed. Birger Bergh (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1991), 201.

¹⁶ For the illustration, see the facsimile *The Holkham Bible Picture Book*, ed. W. O. Hassall (London: The Dropmore Press, 1954), fol. 18r. For the text, see *The Anglo-Norman Text of the Holkham Bible Picture Book*, ed. F. P. Pickering, Anglo-Norman Text Society, 23 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 29.

¹⁷ *Aelred of Rievaulx's De Institutione Inclusarum; Two English Versions*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra

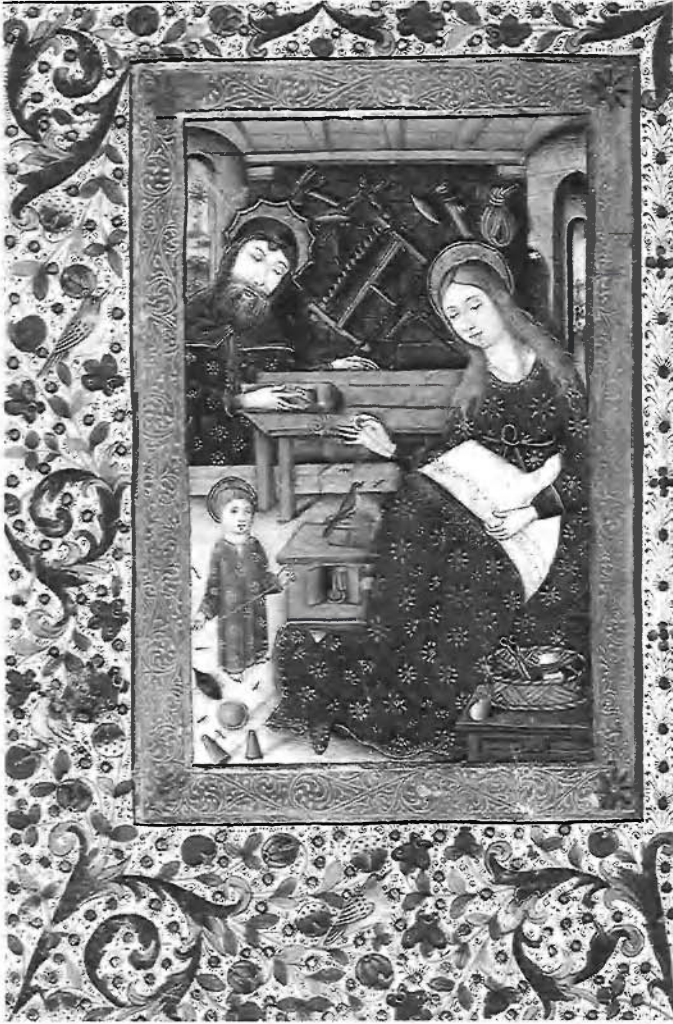


Figure 2: London, British Library, Additional 18193, fol. 48v, reproduced with the permission of the British Library

Barratt. EETS, o.s. 287 (London: Oxford University Press, 1984), 41, ll. 637–61. For the Latin text, see *De institutione inclusarum*, ed. A. Hoste and C. H. Talbot, in *Opera omnia, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis* 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1971), 664. “Nurse” here means “foster-father” rather than “nanny” or “wet-nurse”; it is not intended as a disparaging reference to St. Joseph. See the entry on “nurse” in the *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Robert E. Lewis, Sherman M. Kuhn and Hans Kurath (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952). In the Latin text, the word “nutricius,” meaning “foster-father,” is used for Joseph.

A miniature found in a fifteenth-century Spanish Book of Hours (London, BL, Additional 18193, fol. 48v) comes close to representing what Aelred has in mind (fig. 2). The child Jesus occupies himself with small objects while his parents are engaged in manual labor, Mary with her sewing, Joseph with his carpentry. We can also see the Holy Family at work in a contemporary miniature from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves, which depicts Jesus moving about in his walker while Mary and Joseph are busy with their gender-specific tasks.¹⁹ In another domestic scene of the Holy Family, Mary nurses the infant, while Joseph sits by himself in a corner.²¹

In other late-medieval artistic representations and in plays, Joseph cooks baby food, cuts up his stockings to make swaddling clothes for the infant, dries the baby's diapers, and bathes him. Although Joseph may seem somewhat undignified in these maternal postures, they can be interpreted positively as a demonstration of his genuine love for his helpless charge.²² While medieval artists did not present the image of Joseph holding the infant Jesus in isolation (as the two are portrayed by later artists and can be seen on modern Catholic prayer cards),²³ some medieval writers reflected on the intimacy between Joseph and the Christ-child.²⁴ In a

¹⁹ *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves* ed. John Plummer (New York: George Braziller, 1966), no. 92.

²¹ *Hours of Catherine*, no. 93. It is not clear whether he is eating a bowl of porridge sulkily to compensate for the attention his wife is lavishing on Jesus, or carefully testing the mush before feeding it to the baby. I am inclined to accept the first possibility as being the artist's intention, considering that he emphasizes the physical separation between Joseph and the Madonna and child. Note, too, that only Mary and Jesus have halos in the scenes of the Holy Family in the *Hours of Catherine of Cleves*. In the rest on the flight into Egypt in Master Bertram's Petri-Altar, Joseph is similarly depicted feeding himself while Mary nurses the baby Jesus. For a negative interpretation of Joseph's portrayal in this scene, see Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), Vol. 1, 226; Vol. 2, fig. xi.35; for a positive interpretation of this image, based on its supposed Petrine symbolism, see Sheila Schwartz, "St. Joseph in Meister Bertram's Petri-Altar," *Gesta* 24 (1985): 147–56.

²² Daniele Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages: Fifth-Fifteenth Centuries*, trans. Jody Gladding (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 62–63. On the relics of Joseph's stockings, with which he kept the baby Jesus warm, see Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 58–59. On the application of the hagiographical trope *imitatio mariae* to medieval images of Joseph, see Rosemary Drage Hale, "Joseph as Mother: Adaptation and Appropriation in the Construction of Male Virtue," *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parson and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), 101–16; and Stephen K. Wright, "Two Medieval German Christmas Plays from the Erlau Playbook," *Allegorica: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Literature* 20 (1999): 45–91.

²³ Louis Réau notes that "tandis que l'art médiéval ne le représente presque jamais isolément sans doute par crainte de justifier par des images cultuelles l'hérésie de la conception naturelle du Christ, après la Contre-Réforme, on fait l'honneur de le représenter pour lui-même. . . en père nourricier de Jésus," *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, Vol. 2.2 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), 756–57.

²⁴ On post-medieval images of Joseph, see the recent monograph by Carolyn J. Wilson, *St. Joseph in*

homily in praise of the Virgin Mary, Bernard of Clairvaux exalts Joseph over all those who had awaited the Messiah: "cui denique datum est quod multi reges et prophetae, cum vellent videre, non viderunt, et audire, non audierunt, non solum videre et audire, sed etiam portare, deducere, amplecti, deosculari, nutrire et custodire" ["To him it was given not only to see and to hear what many kings and prophets had longed to see and did not see, to hear and did not hear, but even to carry him, to take him by the hand, to hug and kiss him, to feed him and to keep him safe"].²⁵

Images of tenderness such as this one pertain to Joseph and his infant charge. How, we might ask, did medieval people conceive of father and son relating to each other when Jesus was a boy and later an adolescent? Whereas the devotional texts and images we have considered thus far give us snap-shots of Christ's infancy and childhood, the apocryphal legends take matters further by churning out story after story about the Holy Family. Rather than limit their attention to the domestic life of the Holy Family depicted in relatively static scenes, the apocryphal narrators imagined the interaction that took place between the boy Jesus, his parents, and their Jewish neighbors. In the later Middle Ages, legends about the boyhood of Jesus were recounted in a Latin work known as the *Liber de Infantia Salvatoris*, an apocryphal text that combined stories about Christ's miraculous conception, birth and flight into Egypt recounted in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew with childhood of Jesus stories from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.²⁶

Italian Renaissance Society and Art: New Directions and Interpretations (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2001); and the collection of essays edited Joseph F. Chorprenning, *The Holy Family in Art and Devotion* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 1998).

²⁵ For the Latin, see *A la louange de la Vierge Mère*, ed. and trans. Marie-Imelda Huille and Joel Regnard, Sources Chrétiennes, 390 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1993), 166. For the translation I cite *Magnificat: Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. Marie-Bernard Said and Grace Perigo, Cistercian Fathers Series, 18 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 29. This prayer was formerly recited by Roman Catholic priests before celebrating mass since they, like Joseph, were believed to hold the incarnate Christ in their hands. See *The Raccolta, or Collection of Indulgences Prayers and Good Works*, ed. Ambrose St. John (London: Burns & Oates, 1910), 401, no. 468. For depictions of Joseph holding the Christ-child in his arms found in an Italian translation of the *Meditaciones vitae Christi*, see Wagner, *Embracing Convent Life*, figures 18 and 20. As Sheila Schwartz has pointed out, a medieval exegetical tradition saw Joseph as a priestly figure in his care for the Christ-child, "St. Joseph in Meister Bertram's Petri-Altar," 152. Jean Gerson also imagined the tender care Joseph expended on the infant Jesus. Joseph, he said, "feust gouverneur dudit enfant Jhesus, le porta souuent, le baisa souuent, laraisonna souuent plus familièrement quaultre homme quelconques" ["was the guardian of the infant Jesus, he carried him often, kissed him often, and spoke to him more familiarly than any other man"], *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Palemon Glorieux, Vol. 2 (Paris: Desclée, 1960), 156. Bernardino of Siena also reflected on the intimacy between Joseph and Jesus; see "In vigilia nativitatit dominini," in *Opera omnia*, Vol. 7 (Quaracchi, 1959), 25–26.

²⁶ Whereas the Infancy Gospel of Thomas was composed in the early Christian era, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew dates to the early medieval period. For introductions to these texts, see J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English*

Circulation of such a Latin text in the later Middle Ages is attested to by a version of it printed as a quarto by William Caxton in 1477.²⁷ There are also a number of extant Middle English poems based upon these legends, which I have already alluded to. These were either translations of some unknown Latin version of the *Infantia Salvatoris* or a French version of this text which is no longer extant.²⁸ The Middle English texts appear to have appealed to an audience of pious laity: in the middle of the fifteenth century, Robert Thornton, a member of the Yorkshire gentry, copied a Middle English childhood of Jesus into one of his miscellanies. At the end of the fifteenth century the widowed duchess of York Cecily Neville had a text called the *Infantia Salvatoris* read to her over dinner.²⁹ I will concentrate below on the portrayal of Joseph in the section of the *Infantia Salvatoris* based upon the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, but will first summarize the events narrated in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew portion, calling attention to details that reveal the character of Joseph.

When Mary, who has grown up in the temple, comes of marriageable age, she declares her intention to remain a virgin. The Jewish priests decide to give her to one of the unmarried men of the tribe of Judah to serve as her guardian. They know that Joseph is the man destined for this office when a white dove miraculously flies from the top of his rod.³⁰ Embarrassed by being singled out for this role, Joseph protests that he is an old man with children from a previous marriage, and that Mary is like a granddaughter to him on account of her youth.³¹ Joseph, however, agrees to carry out his duty when the priests warn him against despising the will of God.³²

Upon his return home after an extensive absence, Joseph is aghast to find Mary pregnant, disbelieving the virgins when they testify to her innocence. Greatly

Translation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 68–99.

²⁷ For an edition, see *W. Caxtons Infantia Salvatoris*, ed. Ferdinand Holthausen (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1891).

²⁸ For a description of the extant Middle English texts, see chapter 3, section 3, of my Ph.D. thesis, *The Image of the Wanton Christ-Child in the Apocryphal Infancy Legends of Late Medieval England* (University of Toronto, 2004). For editions of the extant Old French and Anglo-Norman childhood of Jesus poems, consult those by Maureen Boulton, *The Old French Évangile de l'Enfance* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984); *Les enfances de Jesu Crist*. Anglo-Norman Text Society, 43 (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1985).

²⁹ A household ordinance dating sometime before Cecily's death (1495) describes her devotional reading habits. See "Orders and Rules of the Princess Cecill," *A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations for the Government of the Royal Household* (London, 1790), 37*. For a discussion of Cecily's religiosity, see C. A. J. Armstrong, "The Piety of Cicely, Duchess of York: A Study in Late Mediaeval Culture," *England, France and Burgundy in the Fifteenth Century* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1983).

³⁰ *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium Textus et Commentarius*, in *Libri de Nativitate Mariae*, ed. Jan Gijzel, Corpus Christianorum, Series Apocryphorum, 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 363.

³¹ *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium* 365 and 367.

³² *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium* 367 and 69.

fearing the wrath of the Jewish priests, Joseph contemplates dismissing Mary, but is told by an angel in a dream not to fear because Mary's offspring is conceived of the Holy Ghost (cf. Mt. 1:19). Joseph confesses his sin of wrongfully suspecting Mary of infidelity, and both he and Mary are able to endure the test of infidelity to which they are subjected. After the miraculous birth of Jesus and the adoration of the magi, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, telling him to flee with Mary and the child into Egypt (cf. Mt. 2:13).

When, on this journey, dragons come out of a cave, the one-year-old Jesus walks among them to prevent them from harming anyone. He assures his frightened parents that they need not fear for his life: "Nolite me considerare quia infantulus sum; ego enim semper uir perfectus fui et sum, et necesse est ut omnia genera ferarum mansuescere faciam" ["Do not think that I am an infant; for I always was and am a grown man, and it is necessary that I tame all kinds of wild animals"].³³ When Mary expresses her wish to eat of the fruit from a tree, Joseph chides her request as being childish: "Miror te hoc dicere, cum uideas quanta altitudo palmae huius sit" ["I wonder that you say such things, Mary, when you see that this palm tree is so tall"].³⁴ Jesus takes control of the situation, causing the tree to bend down and spring forth water so that the travelers can refresh themselves.³⁵

In the incidents portraying Joseph's reluctance to take Mary as his wife and his dismay at her miraculous conception, he seems to lack the courage and wisdom necessary to fulfill his destined role as husband of the Virgin. He prefers to live a life of celibate obscurity, and cowers before the Jewish elders, fearful of offending the law to which they adhere. On account of this behavior Joseph can be said to lack the self-confidence expected of men in medieval culture, displaying instead the emotionality typically associated with women and children.³⁶ In the dragon and palm tree incidents, Jesus seems to take over Joseph's role of protector and

³³ *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium* 451.

³⁴ *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium*, 461. The incident forms the basis of "The Cherry-Tree Ballad." See Sherwyn T. Carr, "The Middle English Nativity Cherry Tree: The Dissemination of a Popular Motif," *Modern Language Quarterly* 36 (1975): 133–47.

³⁵ In her contribution to this volume, Eva Parra Membrives notes that Hrotsvit of Gandersheim recounts this incident in her poem *Maria*, but that she does not explore the emotive relationship between mother and child, probably on account of her lack of maternal experience.

³⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx, for example, forbids female recluses to teach children at their window because he assumes that they would become emotionally unstable like the children around them. See *De institutione inclusarum*, 640–41. On medieval views of men's rationality and women's corporeality, see, for example, Vern L. Bullough, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages," *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), 32. Pamela Sheingorn similarly analyzes the figure Joseph in the apocryphal infancy legends, focusing on Joseph's lack of masculinity as revealed in the incidents occurring on the flight into Egypt. She bases her analysis on a medieval German apocryphal text in prose. See "Joseph the Carpenter's Failure at Familial Discipline," *Insights and Interpretations: Studies in Celebration of the Eighty-Fifth Anniversary of the Index of Christian Art*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 156–67.

provider. He is a *puer-senex* who wields authority over nature and over his parents, while Joseph is cast as a fearful old man, unequal to the challenges of the flight into Egypt.³⁷ It was probably with these stories in mind that the French theologian and university chancellor Jean Gerson (d. 1429), a zealous advocate of Joseph's cult, argued that Joseph must not have been an old man, because if he were, he would have lacked the strength necessary for the hardships involved in that arduous journey.³⁸

I would now like to consider more closely the medieval legends that describe what the boy Jesus did as he was growing up after the Holy Family returned from Egypt, focusing in particular on the relationship between Joseph and Jesus. As sources I will use the Middle English poems that are based upon the *Infantia Salvatoris*.³⁹ Unlike Vincent Ferrer's Jesus who volunteers to do chores for the sake of setting a good example (see above), the apocryphal Christ-child is a boy who, for the most part, cannot and, indeed, should not be emulated by other children.⁴⁰ The boy's playmates and schoolmasters suffer on account of the wonderful powers he possesses. On numerous occasions, Joseph tries, but is unable, to restrain Jesus.

³⁷ On the hagiographical trope of the *puer-senex*, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990; originally published in German in 1948), 98–101; Teresa C. Carp, "Puer senex in Roman and Medieval Thought," *Latomus* 39 (1980): 736–39; Michael Goodich, "Childhood and Adolescence among the Thirteenth Century Saints," *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1973): 285–309; here 287–88; Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), ch. 1; Christian Gnllka, *Aetas Spiritalis: Die Überwindung der natürlichen Altersstufen als Ideal frühchristlichen Lebens* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlag, 1972), passim; J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chs. 3 and 4; Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990), 15–16, 196–99; and Elena Giannarelli, "Infanzia e santità: un problema della biografia cristiana antica," *Bambini Santi: Rappresentazioni dell' Infanzia e Modelli Agiografici*, ed. Elena Giannarelli and Anna Benvenuti Papi (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1991), 33–39.

³⁸ As noted by David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 128. Sheingorn argues that Gerson promoted the image of Joseph as an admirable head of his family in order to restore order within the church. See "'Illustis patriarcha Joseph': Jean Gerson, Representations of Saint Joseph, and Imagining Community among Churchmen in the Fifteenth Century," *Visions of Community in the Pre-modern World*, ed. Nicholas Howe (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 75–108. For a study of Gerson's efforts to increase his contemporaries' devotion to Joseph, see Paul Payan, "Pour retrouver un père. . . La promotion du culte de saint Joseph au temps de Gerson," *Cahiers de Recherches Medievales* 4 (1997): 15–29.

³⁹ Most of these episodes are derived from the early-Christian Infancy Gospel of Thomas, although some seem to come from later sources, both oral and written.

⁴⁰ Gillian Clark likewise remarks that "the stories of Jesus' own childhood which circulated in the apocryphal 'infancy gospels' were concerned with the power of this exceptional child and certainly not intended as models for other children," "The Fathers and the Children," *Church and Childhood: Papers Read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and the 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 1–27; here 20.

As he confesses to Mary: "Me of pinchez þoruȝ alle þingue / Of Jesues conteyngninge; / Bot i ne may in none wise / Of is dedes hine Justise" ["I am in all respects grieved by Jesus's behavior, but I may in no way discipline him for his deeds"].⁴¹ Jesus never limits himself to mere child's play. When the boy Judas ruins the little pools that he has made, Jesus angrily curses him so that he dies. Jesus then makes birds from the mud of his pools. When a Jew complains to Joseph that his son is working on the Sabbath, "Ioseph on hys heued þan ihesus smate; / He sayde, 'þu sulde be with us algate, / Ffra wanton childer draw'" ["Joseph then hit Jesus on the head and said, 'You should always be with us, away from those unruly children'"].⁴² Angry and frustrated that his foster-son is causing problems, Joseph uses corporal punishment on Jesus.⁴³ The boy responds impishly to his foster-father's admonition by making the birds come to life and commanding them to fly forth. Rather than fear further punishment, Jesus "louȝh so þat it dude him guod" ["laughed so that it did him good"].⁴⁴ Later, when Jesus causes the death of a boy who runs into him, "Ioseph toke þan ihesus by þe eres, / Sayd, 'þu kan haf no ryste'" ["Joseph took Jesus by the ears and said, 'Won't you ever settle down?'"].⁴⁵ When the father of the dead child learns what happened from the other children, he and his friends complain to Joseph: "gude man, all hayle / ȝour childe þat standes before us here / On better maner bus ȝow hym lere / Elles all ȝour frendshyp wil fayle" [greetings, good man, you ought to teach better manners to your child who stands before us here or else you will lose all your friends].⁴⁶ Joseph is frightened by their threats. Rather than deal with this situation, he passes responsibility onto Mary, since, as far as he is concerned, Jesus is really *her* child, not his: Joseph "Bad hir scho suld take hede / Ihesus hyr ȝong son, better to tent, / Elles wyll he gar us all be shent" ["told her she should take heed to discipline her son Jesus better, 'otherwise he will bring about our ruin'"].⁴⁷ Joseph and Mary send Jesus to school on several occasions at the Jews' suggestion,

⁴¹ *Altenglische Legenden: Kindheit Jesu, Geburt Jesu, Barlaam und Josaphat, St. Patrik's Fegefeuer*, ed. Carl Horstmann (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1875), 37, ll. 1089–92.

⁴² *The Middle English Stanzaic Versions of the Life of Saint Anne*, ed. Roscoe E. Parker. EETS, o.s. 174 (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 46, ll. 1765–67. For the tendency of medieval writers to speak of children as "wanton" (in Middle English) or "lascivi" (in Latin), and the speculation they offered as to the causes of children's wantonness, see chapter one of *The Image of the Wanton Christ-Child*.

⁴³ This detail is striking considering that the ultimate Greek source-text, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, says Joseph pulled Jesus's ear, but does not describe Joseph as hitting him. See *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, trans. Ronald F. Hock (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 1995), 111.

⁴⁴ *Altenglische Legenden*, 15, l. 384.

⁴⁵ *Life of Saint Anne*, 48, ll. 1856–57. Albrecht Classen mentions Konrad von Fussesbrunnen's *Leben Jesu* in the introduction to this volume.

⁴⁶ *Life of Saint Anne*, 47, ll. 1785–88.

⁴⁷ *Life of Saint Anne*, 47, ll. 1800–02.

hoping that their son will mend his ways, but the boy's pride and lethal behavior persist. Several of his schoolmasters die as a result of their encounters with their precocious and powerful pupil.

While the Jewish adults blame both Joseph and Mary for their son's unruliness, and threaten to inflict various forms of punishment on all of them,⁴⁸ they tend to menace Joseph more fiercely than they do Mary, presumably because they consider it primarily his paternal duty to discipline Jesus.⁴⁹ Just as Joseph in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew fears the Jewish elders when Mary is found pregnant, so in the legends relating Christ's childhood antics, Joseph lives in constant fear that the Jews will harm him, his wife and his foster-child.⁵⁰ Sometimes Joseph's desire for self-preservation seems to trump his concern for Jesus's welfare, as when he "drof. . . a wei Jhesum and seide þat he ne scholde none languore duelle with him, for he was so much i blamed for is dedes" ["drove. . . away Jesus and said that he should no longer dwell with him, since he was the cause of much reproach on account of his deeds"].⁵¹ At one point, rather than deal with the latest crisis, Joseph decides to run away from the Holy Family, informing Mary: "Þi child I will ga fra hym / He dos so many a wykkid dede / Some hasty man forþi I drede / Þerfore sum tym sal sla hym" ["I will go away from your child who does so many wicked deeds that some time some angry man, I fear, will kill him"].⁵²

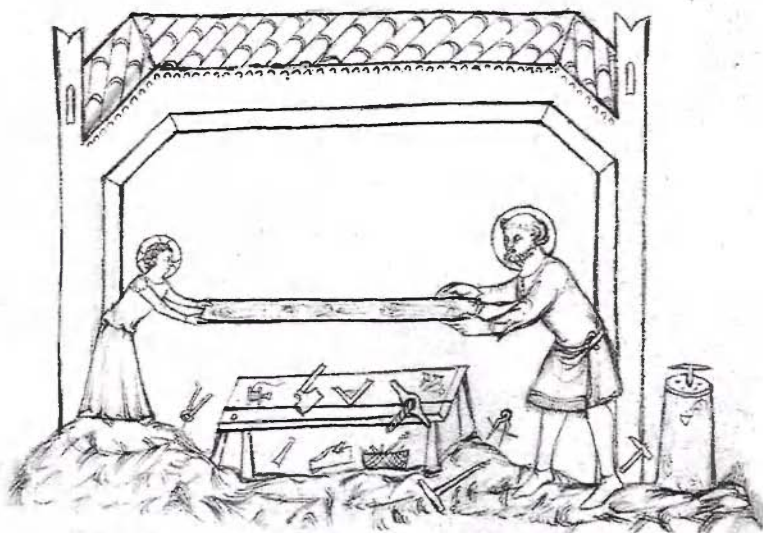
⁴⁸ The Middle English poets exaggerate the Jews' malice by having these characters threaten to make mincemeat out of Joseph and Mary, and to crucify Jesus, "Nachträge zu den Legenden," ed. Carl Horstmann, *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 74 (1885): 327–39; here 330, ll. 197–98; *Altenglische Legenden*, 29, ll. 845–47.

⁴⁹ In his English translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's encyclopedia, John Trevisa sets forth the medieval English understanding of a father's duty: A man who loves his child "techip him in his 3outh wiþ speche and wiþ wordis, and chastip him wiþ beting, and settip and puttup him to lore vndir warde and kepinge of wardeynes and tutours" ["teaches him in his youth with speech and words, and chastises him with beatings, and sets and puts him under tutelage for the sake of instruction and entrusts him to the governance of guardians and tutors"], *On the Properties of Things*. John Trevisa's *Tr anslation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 310. Mothers were also expected to play a disciplinarian role. The author of *Dives and Pauper* warns that "þe fadir & moodir schul answeren. . . for her childyrs wyckydnesse, but þei don her deuer to chastysen hem in her 3ougþe" ["the father and the mother shall answer. . . for their children's wickedness, unless they do their duty to chastise them in their youth"], ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum. EETS, o.s. 275 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 325.

⁵⁰ Surprisingly, the legends' portrayal of the Jews' wanting to kill the Christ-child is similar to a hypothesis put forth by Thomas Aquinas in his argument against the truthfulness of the *Liber de Infantia Salvatoris*: it was fitting, he says, that Christ did not begin to work miracles in his first age because if he had done so, "Aestimassent [Israelitae] enim phantasmam esse incarnationem: et ante opportunum tempus eum cruci tradidissent livore liquefacti" [the Jews would indeed have thought that the incarnation was a phantasm, and, overcome with malice, they would have handed him over for crucifixion before the opportune time"], *Summa Theologiae: Prima Pars* (Madrid: Biblioteca de autores cristianos, 1951), 3, q. 36, a. 4, ad 3.

⁵¹ *Altenglische Legenden*, 39.

⁵² *Life of Saint Anne*, 55, ll. 2103–06.



¶ Tunc autem erat ihs annorum octo.
 erat ioseph architectus et opabatur
 in ligno. Una autem die quidam
 dices homo rogauit eum dicens.
 Domine ioseph rogo uos. ut michi
 faciatis optimū gratiā et mul-
 tiū. et obtulit ei lignū ad faciē-
 dū opus. ioseph autem accipiens
 lignū cepit eū mēsurare. et nō
 puenēbat lignū ad faciēdū opū.
 illud. q̄ sinderat eum. et cepit o-
 tristan ioseph. quia non poterat

secundum uoluntate suam facere.
 ¶ Tūc autem puer ihs cōtristat
 ioseph dixit ei. Noli contristan. s̄
 apphēde unū caput ligni. et ego
 apphēdā aliud. et rectā dū bñ q̄
 tum possūm. Sic factū. ioseph
 adhuc cepit mēsurare lignū. et u-
 uenit optimū pro eo negocio. iō-
 seph autem cū mēssēt quā fecerat
 puenit amplexatus est eū dicens.
 Beatus sum ego quia talem pu-
 erū donauit michi deus.

Figure 3: Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, L. 58. sup., fol. 15v
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By emphasizing Joseph's timidity, the apocryphal legends suggest that he lacks the level-headedness necessary to govern his family. Mary also fears for the Holy Family's survival, but generally maintains peace of mind in the midst of turmoil, on account of her conviction that God will take care of everything. This can be seen in the way that Mary reassures Joseph, after he informs her of the latest conflict between the child Jesus and the Jews: "Ioseph dred 3ow no3t; / He þat hym heder sent and broght / On na wyse wyl forga hym, / & he wyll kepe hym boyth day & nyght / þat na man gettes of hym swylke myght. / To hys kepyng I be take hym" ["fear not, Joseph, he that sent and brought him hither will in no way abandon him. He will protect him both night and day so that no man will be able to kill him. To his keeping I entrust him"].⁵³ Admittedly, on one occasion, Mary expresses exasperation with her son's naughty behavior: "dere sone, this foly þou cesse! / I pray the, if it be thi wille, / Thou late vs somewhere lyfe in peese" [dear son, cease your folly! I beseech you, if it be your will, let us live somewhere in peace"].⁵⁴

As indicated by her speech, Mary has in mind the Holy Family's frequent relocations, which had been Joseph's main tactic for avoiding conflict with their Jewish neighbors. Most of the time, Mary remains calm, gently persuading her son to restore to life those whose death he is supposed to have caused. To take an example: Mary begs Jesus that he bring back to life a boy who fell from a flight of stairs by saying, "Lefe sone, lyfe late thou hym haue, / I praye the, if thi wille it bee" [dear son, let him have life, I beseech you, if it be your will"].⁵⁵ Although Mary strikes Jesus in the "Ballad of the Bitter Witty" for causing the death of his playmates, in the apocryphal legends she, unlike Joseph, never uses corporal punishment on him.⁵⁶ After a while, the Jews go straight to Mary when the latest disaster has struck, for they come to realize the power of her maternal intercession. Like a dutiful son, Jesus always concedes to her wishes.

In these poems the relationship between Jesus and Mary may be compared to that between a prince and his queen mother. Jesus tends to regard Joseph as his mother's groom, rather than as his foster-father who exercises legitimate authority over him.⁵⁷ Joseph himself creates a matriarchical arrangement by repeatedly running to Mary when troubles arise. For instance, when the Jews tell Joseph to

⁵³ *Life of Saint Anne*, 55, ll. 2107–12. Mary also assumes, naively, that Jesus can simply cause his enemies to die before they kill him. See, for example, "Nachträge," 335, ll. 571–72.

⁵⁴ "Nachträge," 334, ll. 506–08. For an explicit reference to Joseph's practice of relocating the Holy Family, see *Life of Saint Anne*, 62, ll. 2368–70.

⁵⁵ "Nachträge," 334, ll. 553–54.

⁵⁶ On the ballad, see Gordon Hall Gerould, "The Ballad of the Bitter Witty," *PMLA* 23 (1908): 141–67. The boy Jesus causes his playmates to drown and his mother strikes him with a "handful of bitter witty" to punish his naughty behavior.

⁵⁷ Note, for example, the way Jesus mentions Joseph as an afterthought in his statement that he commands the tree to bend down "For mi Moder and for hire fere, / For iche ire louie" [for my mother and her companion, for I love her]. *Altenglische Legenden*, 8, ll. 160–61.

chastise his son for causing the death of his playmates, "Ioseph lay þer all at male esse, / Sayd mary suld þat mys amese" ["Joseph was in distress and said that Mary should ameliorate the situation"].⁵⁸ Joseph is despondent about his power to control Jesus, and is even scared of upsetting him. He justifies abdicating his authority to Mary by the following reasoning: "3if ich were in þat wille / þat iche seide ou3t him for to grulle, / He wolde cuyþe on me is mi3ht" ["if I were of a mind to say anything that would annoy him, he would exhibit his power against me"].⁵⁹

While the relationship between father and son in these legends is hardly exemplary, the legends do not fail to mention the affection that exists between Joseph and Jesus. Some of the recipients of the Christ-child's beneficence are connected with Joseph in some way. For example, when Mary explains to Jesus that Joseph's "best friends" are suffering from a famine, Jesus causes a miraculous harvest of wheat.⁶⁰ On another occasion, when a rich man who bears the name of Joseph dies, Jesus orders Joseph to take the kerchief that he is wearing, place it upon the dead man, and bid him rise in Jesus's name.⁶¹

Another story relates how Jesus comes to the aid of Joseph himself when the old man discovers that his servant has cut a piece of wood too short. Jesus tells Joseph not to worry and then lengthens the beam for him.⁶² In this episode, the narrator explicitly comments on the bond between father and son: "Jesus louede Josepe a ri3ht, / And Josep Jhesum bi daye and ni3ht" ["Jesus truly loved Jesus, and Joseph Jesus both day and night"].⁶³ As we have already seen, Joseph demonstrates his love for Jesus by his constant concern for his safety. Falsely informed that Jesus has been "strangled" by wild beasts, "Josep it gan rewe sore: / Departi he wende sikerliche / Fram þe childe þat he louede much" ["Joseph was greatly grieved: he thought that he surely was going to have to part from the child that he dearly

⁵⁸ *Life of Saint Anne*, 63, ll. 2420 and 2422–23. Joseph's defeatist attitude here may be compared to his posture in some medieval nativity scenes, in which, in the words of Bernardino of Siena, "foolish painters. . . portray him as a melancholy old man, resting his cheek upon his hand," as quoted by Iris Origo, *The World of San Bernardino* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), 38.

⁵⁹ *Altenglische Legenden*, 38, ll. 1097–99.

⁶⁰ *Life of Saint Anne*, 68, ll. 2614 ff.

⁶¹ *Altenglische Legenden*, 51–53.

⁶² *Altenglische Legenden*, 47, ll. 1402 ff. This story is also recounted by the fourteenth-century Italian bishop Petrus de Natalibus in his chapter on "Ioseph sanctissimus" in his *Catalogus sanctorum* (Lyons, 1508), bk. 3, ch. 209, fol. 78 recto. Thomas N. Hall discusses the episode of the beam in "The Miracles of the Lengthened Beam in Apocryphal and Hagiographic Tradition," *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 109–39. For a depiction of this episode in a fifteenth-century illustrated Latin Bible harmony (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, L. 58. sup., fol. 15v), see figure 3. For a possible depiction of the beam miracle on a fifteenth-century misericord, see Dorothy and Henry Kraus, *The Hidden World of Misericords* (New York: G. Braziller, 1975), 158, fig. 135.

⁶³ *Altenglische Legenden*, 47, ll. 1410–11.

loved”].⁶⁴ Details such as these suggest that the authors of these Middle English poems were attuned to the affection between the fathers and children they saw around them.⁶⁵

In the childhood of Jesus poems, the Jews at first assume that Joseph begot Jesus, but soon begin to question Christ’s parentage when they perceive his wonderful powers and knowledge. On the other hand, they think that Christ is just an ordinary child when they behold his naughtiness.⁶⁶ One of Jesus’s schoolmasters tells him that he would think that he is the Messiah “If it ne ware thi werkes wild” [“if it were not for your wild deeds”].⁶⁷ The masters also reject Jesus as the Messiah because, according to the prophets, “A maydyn withoutyn ony awe / Shuld beryn þe kyng of glorie. / . . . / Old Joseph weddyd Marye” [“a maiden, without doubt, should give birth to the king of glory,” but “Mary is married to old Joseph”].⁶⁸ Some medieval clerical writers explained that it was necessary for Mary to have a spouse because this made it look as if Jesus was born like other children; his belonging to an apparently normal family hid his divinity from the devil.⁶⁹ Bernardino of Siena (d. 1444) likewise notes that Joseph was not only called and reputed to be Christ’s father, “sed etiam tenere oportet quod sanctus vir publice se habebat ad eum verbo, actu et gestu atque cura et imperio, sicut verus pater ad filium suum, et similiter Christus ad eum. Alias aperte innotuisset vicinis et mundo, quod non erat filius eius” [“but it is also necessary to believe that the holy man publicly conducted himself toward him in word, act, bearing, care, and authority as a true father toward his son, and Christ as a son toward his father. Otherwise it would have become openly known to their neighbors and the world that he was not his son”].⁷⁰

⁶⁴ *Altenglische Legenden*, 44, ll. 1295–97.

⁶⁵ Scholars have sometimes misinterpreted Aries as claiming that medieval people did not care about their children, but he clearly states that “The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children. . . . In medieval society this awareness [of the particular nature of childhood] was lacking,” *Centuries of Childhood* 128.

⁶⁶ István Bejczy makes a similar point: the authors of the late-medieval childhood of Jesus narratives emphasize Jesus’s childishness in order to counterbalance the divinity he manifests through his miracles. See “Jesus’ Laughter and the Childhood Miracles: the *Vita rhythmica*,” *South African Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1994): 50–61.

⁶⁷ “Nachträge,” 333, l. 466.

⁶⁸ *Sammlung Altenglischer Legenden*, ed. Carl Horstmann (Heilbronn: Verlag Gebr. Henniger, 1878), 105, ll. 296–99.

⁶⁹ On the theme of the divine deception of the devil, see also Meyer Schapiro, “‘Muscipula Diaboli,’ The Symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece,” *Late Antique, Early Christian and Mediaeval Art: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1979), 1–11.

⁷⁰ *Opera omnia*, Vol. 7, 25. According to the editor, in this passage Bernardino is quoting Spiritual Franciscan Peter of John Olivi. Bernard of Clairvaux likewise says that it was fitting for Mary to be betrothed to Joseph at the time of her conception so that the mystery of the Incarnation would be kept secret from the demons, *A la louange*, 156 and 158.

Along similar lines, Johannes de Caulibus argues that Christ must have been an ordinary youth after he was found in the temple at age twelve, because if he had continued to inspire wonder in those around him, they would not have been astonished at his wisdom when he started preaching as an adult, or later remarked, when he began his public ministry, that he was merely a carpenter's son.⁷¹ The authors and transmitters of the apocryphal legends were not worried about such inconsistencies between their presentation of the childhood of Christ and what the Bible suggests about his hidden years.

In the legends, the Jews suspect the Christ-child's supernatural origin on account of the wonderful things he says and does. One of the Middle English poems has the Jews correctly deduce that Jesus is not the son of Joseph according to the flesh, by having them tell Joseph: "3owr hawn child he no3t esse, / Ffor he werkes wondrous on many wyse / & in þis cete makes grett maystryse / Hys werkes bers witnesse" ["he is not your own son, for he works wonders in many ways and in this city he performs great feats—his works bear witness thus"].⁷² Mary's crafty remark leads the Jews to believe that Joseph is really Jesus's father: "God wote wele þat I hym bar; / Als oures we sall hym drysse" ["God knows well that I bore him and that we shall bring him up as our own son"].⁷³ Christ's response is also ambiguous, for he does not clearly state who his father is: "bot my fader wyll ware, / Swylke werkes ne wroght I neuer mare" ["if it had not been my father's will, I would never have worked such works"].⁷⁴ This statement may be misinterpreted as meaning that Jesus is doing Joseph's will and so he is the one to blame for Jesus's mischief.

In another Middle English poem, when the Jews ask Joseph whether he is Jesus's father, he actually says no, which leaves the Jews to wonder who the child's father really is.⁷⁵ Ambiguity about Christ's father is also central to the finding in the temple scene described in the second chapter of the gospel of Luke, which formed

⁷¹ *Meditations*, 58. For the Latin, see *Meditaciones*, 67. The canonical gospels describe how the people who had watched Jesus grow up ask, when he begins his public ministry, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Mt. 13:55; cf. Lk. 4:22).

⁷² *Life of Saint Anne*, 49, ll. 1863–66.

⁷³ *Life of Saint Anne*, 49, ll. 1868–69.

⁷⁴ *Life of Saint Anne*, 49, ll. 1870–71.

⁷⁵ "Nachträge," 333, l. 425. Scholars have hitherto focused much attention on the theme of Joseph as a cuckold in the biblical plays and the Mérode Tryptic. See, for example, Joseph L. Baird and Lorraine Y. Baird, "Fabliau Form and the Hegge *Joseph's Return*," *The Chaucer Review* 8 (1973): 159–69; Martin W. Walsh, "Divine Cuckold/Holy Fool: The Comic Image of Joseph in the English 'Troubles' Play," *England in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. W. M. Ormrod (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1986), 278–97; and Louise O. Vasvari, "Joseph on the Margin: The Mérode Tryptic and Medieval Spectacle," *Medievalia* 18 (1995): 163–89. Recent studies have suggested that the late-medieval Joseph is a more nuanced character. See Tom Flanigan, "Everyman or Saint? Doubting Joseph in the Corpus Christi Cycles," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, Vol. 8 (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 19–48; and Paul Payan, "Ridicule? L'image ambiguë de Saint Joseph à la fin du moyen âge," *Médiévales* 39 (2000): 96–111.

the basis of an episode which appears in some of the Middle English childhood of Jesus poems.⁷⁶ Whereas in Luke the twelve-year-old Jesus goes to Jerusalem with his parents to celebrate the Jewish feast and stays behind in the temple, in one of the Middle English poems an adolescent Jesus leaves home and wanders around for quite some time before his parents go in search of him. After looking here and there, his parents find him in Jerusalem arguing with the teachers in the temple. In accordance with Luke, Mary gently chides Jesus: "swete son ihesus, / What ayld þe & why dyd yow so? / Lo, þi fadyr & I wyth mykyll wo / Has soght þe hedyr þus" ["sweet son Jesus, what came over you and why did you do what you did? Behold, your father and I have sought you here with much woe"].⁷⁷

Christ's response, a close translation of Luke, declares the mission given to him by his heavenly Father, and his pious determination to carry it out: "to seke me noȝt ȝow nedes, / Ffor wyt ȝe wele in my fader dedes / All way be me bus" ["you do not need to seek me, for know this well: I must always be about my father's business"].⁷⁸ Mary and Jesus clearly have different fathers in mind.⁷⁹ Unlike Luke, the Middle English poet emphasizes that Christ was a stubborn child by adding some words to Mary's response: "at þi wyll ay yow do; / Bot now come forth with us" ["you always do your will, but now come forth with us"].⁸⁰ In this passage and throughout the apocryphal legends, Joseph's fatherhood is overshadowed by that of the heavenly Father, whose will has a greater claim to Christ's obedience.⁸¹

Joseph's fatherhood is similarly slighted in late-medieval art. As Pamela Sheingorn has shown, some nativity scenes draw attention to the trinitarian relationship existing between God the Father, Mary, and the infant Jesus by means of a triangle of rays connecting the three of them.⁸² Sometimes Joseph is depicted as ignoring the miraculous birth of Jesus or is not even included in the nativity scene, which suggests that the artists consider him a mere human accessory to the

⁷⁶ This scene is also included in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas; see *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, trans. Hock, 141 and 143.

⁷⁷ *Life of Saint Anne*, 76, ll. 2931–33. That Mary in these poems wields greater influence over Jesus than Joseph does is probably due to the temple scene in Luke (ch. 2), in which she, rather than Joseph, reprimands the twelve-year-old Jesus.

⁷⁸ *Life of Saint Anne*, 76, ll. 2935–37.

⁷⁹ Similarly, in the Hegge play of *Joseph's Return*, a pregnant Mary tells Joseph about the paternity he shares with Jesus's heavenly father: "This childe is Goddys and ȝoure" ["this child is God's and yours"] *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D.8*, ed. Stephen Spector. EETS, ss 11 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 125, l. 42.

⁸⁰ *Life of Saint Anne*, 76, ll. 2939–40.

⁸¹ Medieval theologians and canonists raised the question of the sense in which Joseph can be said to be the father of Jesus despite his not having begotten him. On this issue, see Francis L. Filas, *Joseph and Jesus: A Theological Study of Their Relationship* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1952), chapters 2 and 3; and Irven M. Resnick, "Marriage in Medieval Culture: Consent Theory and The Case of Joseph and Mary," *Church History* 69 (2000): 350–71; here 368.

⁸² "The Maternal Behavior of God: Divine Father as Fantasy Husband," *Medieval Mothering* 77–99.

real Holy Family.⁸³ It should also be noted that, in the same period, the revelations of St. Bridget of Sweden caused a number of artists to portray Joseph more favorably. According to Bridget, Joseph enters the cave where Mary has instantaneously given birth to Jesus soon after the event and kneels down before the babe in reverent adoration, as does Bridget the visionary in some depictions of the nativity.⁸⁴

Somewhat surprisingly, at the same time that derogatory images of Joseph were being put forth in the later Middle Ages, some influential churchmen began drawing people's attention to the sacred character of the family in which Jesus grew up. For example, the thirteenth-century Dominican Jacobus de Voragine reports a vision in which a sinner is told that Joseph will perfect, Mary enlighten, and the child Jesus save him.⁸⁵ Jean Gerson (d. 1429) referred to the Holy Family as a "trinitas" on more than one occasion, and expressed his sense of inadequacy in speaking of this mystery: "Cuperem mihi verba suppeterent ad explicandum tam altum et absconditum a saeculis mysterium, tam admirandam venerandam-que trinitatem Jesu, Joseph et Mariae" ["I wish that I had words to explain such a lofty mystery, hidden from the ages, that so wonderful and venerable trinity of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary"].⁸⁶ Gerson goes on to note that Joseph was the head of Mary and that she exercised authority over Jesus, thereby implying that Joseph ruled over Jesus.⁸⁷ Christ's subjection to his parents is a cause of wonder for

⁸³ In early medieval (and Byzantine) nativity scenes, artists represented Joseph as an old man turned aside from the nativity or sleeping in order to signify that he was not the real father of Jesus. See André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 130. This iconography persisted into the later Middle Ages, as can be seen in a nativity scene of Giotto. Ruth Mellinkoff closes her book with a painting in which Joseph is leaning against a shed with his back completely turned to the newborn Jesus, *Outcasts*, Vol. 2, fig. xi.41.

⁸⁴ On the influence that Bridget's vision of the nativity had on late-medieval art, see Henry Cornell, *The Iconography of the Nativity of Christ* (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1924), ch. 1; and Gertrud Schiller, *The Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. Janet Seligman, Vol. 1 (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), 78–80. For Bridget's revelation of the nativity, see *The Liber Celestis*, 485–57. For the Latin text, see *Den Heligas Birgittas Revelaciones: Bok VII*, ed. Birger Bergh (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksel, 1967), 187–90.

⁸⁵ *Legenda aurea*, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, Vol. 2 (Tavarnuzze: SISMEL, 1998), 743–43. Cynthia Hahn refers to this passage in her article on the Trinitarian imagery in the Merode Triptych: "Joseph Will Perfect, Mary Enlighten and Jesus Save Thee": The Holy Family as Marriage Model in the Merode Triptych," *The Art Bulletin* 68 (1986): 54–66.

⁸⁶ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 2, 169; "Sermon Jacob autem," *Oeuvres*, Vol. 5 (Paris, 1963), 358. Rather than place Mary's name before that of Joseph, and Jesus's before both of theirs, Gerson puts the name of Joseph first, as noted by Herlihy, "The Making of the Medieval Family: Symmetry, Structure, and Sentiment," *Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978–1991*, ed. A. Molho (Providence, Rhode Island and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 152. Herlihy says that medieval families were "invited to aspire" to this "cultural and emotional ideal," the *concordia charitatis*, in the words of Gerson.

⁸⁷ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 5, 358. Similarly, in her revelations to Bridget, Mary informs the visionary of her

Gerson: "subditus fabro is qui fabricavit auroram et solum; subditus feminae textrinae cui flectitur omne genu, coelestium, terrestrium, et infernorum (cf. Phil. 2:10)" ["he who made the dawn and the sun was subject to a carpenter, he, to whom is bent every knee in heaven, on earth, and in hell, was subject to a woman who was a weaver"].⁸⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux similarly marveled that Jesus "erat. . . subditus illis. Quis, quibus? Deus hominibus: Deus, inquam, cui Angeli subditi sunt, cui Principatus et Potestates oboediunt, subditus erat Mariae; nec tantum Mariae, sed etiam Ioseph propter Mariam" ["was obedient to them. Who? God. To whom? To men. God, I repeat, to whom the angels are subject. . . was obedient to Mary. And not only Mary but to Joseph, too, for Mary's sake"].⁸⁹ Like Gerson and Bernard, the apocryphal legends emphasize the primacy of the bond between Mary and Jesus and the dependency of the father-son relationship upon that bond. Yet, as I have shown, they tend to focus on the tenuousness of that relationship.

Far from idealizing the Holy Family as a reflection of the Holy Trinity, as in Bartolomeo Esteban Murillo's seventeenth-century painting "The Trinities of Heaven and Earth," the apocryphal legends present a human family in which a rambunctious child creates problems that must be dealt with by his parents. Medieval families who heard these legends might have been encouraged by the thought that difficulties were not lacking for the Holy Family, nor the grace needed to cope with them. After all, the Holy Family manages to survive despite all the difficulties it encounters. While medieval parents and children might have wondered at the Holy Family's pious disagreement about fetching water, they would not have been able to relate to it very well. Whereas Vincent Ferrer recommends that children imitate the boy Jesus, the apocryphal narrators suggest ways in which parents should and should not deal with their unruly children. Despite their differences, both Ferrer and the apocryphal narrators can be said to

wifely submission to Joseph: "Bot all if I was ordende to be in wirshipe aboue all opir creature and all men opir þan mi son, neurþeles 3et serued I Joseph, and ordeinde for him þat was nedefull to him, and mi son was laweli and soiet to vs bothe" [but even though I was ordained to be honored above every creature and person except for my son, nevertheless I served Joseph and helped him with his necessities, and my son was lowly and subject to both of us], *Liber Celestis*, 488. For the Latin, see *Den Heligas Birgittas Revelaciones: Bok VII* 194.

⁸⁸ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 5, 358. Like other medieval Latin writers, Gerson uses *faber* and *fabricavit*—words which have the same root—in order to underline the humility manifested by the Christ-child's submission to his father. Yrjö Hirn cites Sicardus Cremonensis and William Durandus as examples of medieval religious writers who saw in Joseph the carpenter a reflection of God the creator, *The Sacred Shrine: A Study of the Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 270 and 518. Ambrose of Milan and the thirteenth-century Franciscan poet Walter of Wimborne are two other writers who noted the significance of Joseph being a *faber*. For the passage in Ambrose, see *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, in *Opera, Pars IV*, ed. Marcus Adriaen. Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 12 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1957), 76; for the verses in Walter, see *Marie carmina*, in *The Poems of Walter of Wimborne*, ed. A. G. Rigg (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), stanza 311, ll. 3–4.

⁸⁹ *A la louange de la Vierge Marie* 122 and 124. For the translation, I cite *Magnificat*, 11.

practice “the art of making religion relevant,” though in different ways.⁹⁰ In this respect, and in their mutual attempt to satisfy medieval people’s curiosity about the hidden life of Jesus, apocryphal narrators and medieval religious writers like Vincent Ferrer are not that different from each other.

A modern audience may find Joseph of the apocryphal legends comical, but other reactions to his portrayal are possible. In the fifteenth-century an anonymous French Celestine monk considered a text he refers to as the *Livre des enfances Jhesucrist* blasphemous because it portrayed Joseph reprimanding his foster-son “comme malvaiz garçon” [“as a bad boy”], and Jesus responding to “monseigneur saint Joseph orgueilleusement” [“reverend St. Joseph proudly”] and menacingly.⁹¹ Yet in England, in the same century, a Middle English poet defended his portrayal of Jesus as a troublesome child by arguing that this is the way children normally behave and that Jesus was a real human being.⁹² He cites St. Paul’s statement that when he was a child he behaved childishly (1 Cor. 13:11). Whereas for the pious Frenchman the apocryphal Christ-child was too much like normal children, for the earthy Englishman it was an act of piety to acknowledge the humanity of Jesus.

⁹⁰ I borrow this phrase from V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 252.

⁹¹ For the text, see Max Lieberman, “Saint Joseph, Jean Gerson et Pierre d’Ailly dans un manuscrit de 1464,” *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 20 (1972): 5-110, 253-61; here 50-51.

⁹² *Life of St. Anne*, 89, ll. 3433-444.

