With the character of Joseph, authors seem to have a blank slate with which to work. There are few appearances of Joseph in the Bible, none after Jesus reaches the age of twelve. There is almost nothing known of Joseph beyond the fact that he was the father (adopted father or foster father or however one decides to term his role) of Jesus. He was betrothed to Mary, yet he found out that she was pregnant, and he decided to end their relationship. Other than those facts, though, the gospel authors tell us nothing about Joseph. In fact, after the birth narrative (and the trip to Jerusalem in Luke), Joseph is completely absent, noticeably so when Mary and her sons come to try to take Jesus home. If Joseph were still alive, it would be his job to perform such actions, not his wife’s or sons’. Because of his lack of appearances, it is largely believed that Joseph must have died before Jesus began his ministry (Blair 979). There is one work, the History of Joseph the Carpenter, which describes Joseph’s death in detail, but it is not considered to be historically reliable, especially as Joseph dies at the age of 111, despite his not being mentioned in the gospels after Jesus turns twelve (Blair 980). The early church does not help in this matter, either. Joseph Lienhard states quite clearly, “Anyone who speaks about St. Joseph in the early church should begin with a warning to his hearers: don’t expect too much. For the first millennium of Christianity, St. Joseph was all but ignored in preaching, liturgical celebrations, martyrologies, and theological writing.” He goes on to point out that, to his knowledge, no one in the early church ever preached a homily on Joseph. There were no feasts of St. Joseph until one was celebrated in Egypt in the seventh century, and there were none in the rest of the church until 1000 ce at the earliest. There were no theological writings about Joseph until the late fourteenth century when writings about Joseph began to appear more frequently (3).
Thus, authors have to explain his absence one way or another. Largely due to this absence of information, there has been much speculation as to what happened to Joseph and what kind of man he was before he married Mary. All of them have Joseph dying earlier or being physically incapacitated, so as to remove him from the adult Jesus’ ministry.

Almost all of the authors under consideration here begin with what would be expected in their portrayals of Joseph. In Saramago’s work, Joseph is a carpenter, barely in his 20s, who is honest and pious. He works hard, though he does not have a great deal of money, and he seems like a typical Jewish male of that time.

Similarly, in Man of Nazareth Joseph is a carpenter who has two apprentices, James and John. The mention of these two names at first might make the reader think of Jesus’ disciples with these names; however, in light of Burgess’ Roman Catholic background, it seems he is trying to show how some people, namely Protestants, might think that Joseph had other children by Mary, as James and John are two of the names of the sons of Mary and Joseph listed in the Protestant Bible.

The Gospel According to the Son, too, has Joseph working as a carpenter, and he takes Mary to Bethlehem for Jesus’ birth, but in Mailer’s book, Joseph does this (not because of the census) because he is descended from King David, and King David was born in Bethlehem. Thus, as Joseph has been born in Bethlehem, he believes Jesus should be born in Bethlehem, too. For Mailer, who is Jewish, it is easy to see his reasoning. He understands the importance of the Davidic line for the Messiah, which would be much more important than Jesus’ fulfilling a minor prophecy of birth in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:6). This focus on Jesus’ ancestry is apparent in both Matthew and Luke, as Matthew shows how Joseph’s lineage can be traced back to Abraham, and Luke traces it all the way back to Adam. Though the genealogies differ, in both cases Joseph traces his ancestors through the line of David, important for one who is going to serve as the father of the Messiah, for the Messiah is to come from the line of David.

Testament, however, changes Joseph’s occupation from that of a carpenter, as in the gospels, to being a stonemason; however, Joseph is still on the
economic level he would have been in the gospel accounts. This change is not surprising since Ricci draws much of his information and inspiration from “the Jesus Seminar and . . . other contemporary scholars who have tried to arrive at an understanding of the historical Jesus” (457). The Greek word that is translated as “carpenter” in the Gospel accounts is actually tekton, which can be translated as “craftsman” (Filas 57). Thus, Ricci is trying to be as historically accurate as possible.1

This seeming minor change of vocation actually has a major impact on the work. Like Ricci’s usage of ancient spellings for the characters’ names, it reminds the reader that translations have changed the Gospel accounts, leading to major changes. Through Ricci’s calling into question the translation of a word as simple as “carpenter,” he forces the reader to question the translation of more important passages.

Another change that Testament makes, at least for most modern readers, is to indicate that Joseph, about forty-five, is nearly three times Mary’s age when they marry. He has been previously married, but he has put the first woman away because she failed to produce an heir, the main purpose of a woman in Jewish society at that time. Joseph knows that Mary can produce an heir because she has already become pregnant with Jesus. In fact, Mary’s pregnancy is the only reason she marries Joseph, as he is beneath her social status. He lives with his brothers before she comes to be with him, and he threatens to put her away if she fails to produce an heir.

Though this change seems to make Joseph a much less likeable character, Ricci is again reminding the reader of the social and cultural mores of the time. We have tried to turn Mary and Joseph into a modern couple who were in love with each other, a modern-day Romeo and Juliet, especially by an emphasis on Joseph’s willingness to put Mary away quietly; however, a man in the Jewish culture of that time both wanted and needed an heir more than he needed a spouse he loved.

Man of Nazareth, on the other hand, has Joseph completely unable to have children because of an accident he had when he was younger. When

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1In "An Honest Account of a Memorable Life," Reynolds Price also changes the vocation of Joseph to that of a builder. As Price has spent years studying Greek, the similarity is not surprising.
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Mary’s mother talks with him about the possibility of marriage, he responds, “You know well enough that I can be the husband of nobody. That I was injured in this very shop when it was my father’s, God rest him, and injured where it is most shameful for a man to be injured. Meaning that I cannot do a man’s part, if I may say this to a lady” (19). Mary’s mother does not believe this story; she thinks it is an excuse that Joseph has used not to marry, though he is middle-aged. Joseph, however, returns to the story later in the work, and it is evident that he and Mary never have any other children, though it remains unclear as to whether or not they ever had sex, and the brief description of Joseph’s injury makes that seem unlikely.

The idea that Joseph and Mary do not have any children is in line with Burgess’ Roman Catholic background, which defines Mary as a perpetual virgin. This tradition began at least as early as *The Book of James* (probably written prior to the second century), which presents the idea that Mary remained a virgin throughout their marriage. Because, according to *The Book of James*, Joseph was a widower with children from his previous marriage, the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in the gospels are actually his half-brothers and sisters (Cunneen 74). This is further strengthened by Burgess’ book giving its Joseph two apprentices, James and John, who either are or who might be mistaken for Jesus’ half-brothers.

While Burgess works hard to illustrate how this mistake might be made, he does not deal with the other siblings of Jesus mentioned in the Bible. He also neglects to point out how Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus affects Joseph’s circumstances concerning having an heir. If a Jewish man could not have children, but then was given the opportunity to have an heir, one would assume that he would be ecstatic. It is true that Jesus loved and respected Joseph, which implies that Joseph treated him as his true son, but that is more told than shown in the novel. What might have been a rich idea for Burgess to develop is glossed over as he seeks merely to fulfill an ideological requirement he has.

Mailer’s approach is much more similar to that of Ricci concerning children and the sexual life of Mary and Joseph. His book shows Joseph as a

2Matthew 13:55–56 and Mark 6:3, for example, name his brothers and mention that he has sisters.
widower when he meets Mary; thus, he is many years older than she is. This arrangement was not uncommon at the time, and Mailer does not indicate that Joseph has any children from the previous marriage; therefore, he likely would have wanted to carry on his family by having children with Mary. Again, as we have seen already, the necessity of a Jewish male for an heir motivates the portrayal of Joseph. Because of his focus on obtaining an heir, Joseph is obviously upset when Mary becomes pregnant before their marriage. He first blames himself for not protecting her, but then he blames her.

Here, The Gospel According to the Son draws on two legends about Joseph. Both the Book of James (Protoevangelium) and the History of Joseph the Carpenter (fourth century) show Joseph to be a widower with children from a previous marriage, and both show him marrying a twelve-year-old Mary (Blair 980). Mailer’s Joseph is an older widower, but his Joseph is one who wants children. This modifies Joseph’s character in two ways: First, it allows Mailer’s book to make Joseph more human by having him become angry when he first hears of Mary’s pregnancy. However, he quickly recovers himself and decides to put her away quietly, which is more in line with the gospel accounts.

Second, it explains the debate over Jesus’ brothers and sisters. Since Jesus is not Joseph’s true heir, he feels the need to create heirs of his own. If Mailer’s Joseph had been an older widower with children, he would have felt no compulsion to carry on his family line. And, in fact, he may have been too old to do so, had Mailer not made this minor change.

Mailer’s Jewishness stands in stark contrast to Burgess’ Roman Catholic background here. Burgess’ book is so concerned about keeping Mary’s perpetual virginity intact that it ignores the possible reaction that Joseph probably has to news of Mary’s pregnancy. Yes, he would be upset that she cheated on him, but when the angel tells him that Jesus is from God, he should have a much stronger reaction than he does. Mailer, on the other hand, knows the importance of Joseph’s producing a true heir, so he removes the children from the Joseph legend.

What makes Mary’s pregnancy more troublesome for both Joseph and Mary, though, is that Mailer’s book presents them as members of the Essene
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community.\(^3\) Since sexual sins were viewed much more severely by the Essene community than by ordinary Jews, Joseph rightly deduces that Mary could be stoned to death if he told the Essene priests about her pregnancy out of wedlock. This change heightens Joseph’s righteousness in his willingness to put Mary away quietly. Rather than simply being held to Jewish law, by having them as members of the Essene community, Mailer’s book raises the stakes of consequences for Mary. Thus, instead of being shunned by her family and community, she would probably be killed. And this change makes Joseph’s actions seem even better by comparison.

Joseph’s reaction to the news that Mary is pregnant is one of the defining characteristics about him in the biblical accounts. He has been betrothed to Mary, yet he finds out that she is pregnant, and he decides to end their relationship. He plans to do so quietly, though, because he “was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace” (Matt. 1:19). However, an angel appears to him and convinces him to marry her anyway and raise the child as his own. It is his reaction to Mary’s news that is important here. Joseph has every right to bring her before the religious leaders of the day and have the betrothal annulled, leading to Mary’s being ostracized by the community. But, because he is a “righteous man,” he plans to put her away quietly, as Mailer’s portrayal of Joseph shows.

Burgess’ book may have Joseph related to the Essenes, as well. His injury seems to have made him consider joining a group of either Gnostics or Essenes in his younger days, though it is unclear which. The group is described merely as “a very cleanly sect [sic] of people who believed only in the spirit, condemning the body and the things of the body as evil, eating and drinking with groans and dunging [sic] in horror” (32). His loose affiliation with this group leads people to believe that his account of his injury has been invented and that it is his association with this group that has kept him pure.

\(^3\)Oddly enough, the only other author I found that clearly has Joseph as an Essene is Christopher Moore in *Lamb*. Since his book is not the most serious account of Jesus’ life, it seems strange that both he and Mailer would reach the same conclusion regarding Joseph’s background.
Thus, when Joseph finds out about Mary’s pregnancy, he is convinced that she has cheated on him. One of the few times Burgess’ book strays from the gospel accounts is when it shows Joseph reacting angrily to Mary’s confession, with no indication that he plans to put her away quietly, though the book also does not show his saying that he will bring her before the law. Instead, Mary simply tells him to go home and that they will talk about it the next day, knowing that God will speak with him that night, and an angel does appear to ease Joseph’s mind. Throughout the entire debate, it is clear that Mary is portrayed as the person in control of the situation, a fitting depiction given Burgess’ background.

_The Last Temptation of Christ_ goes beyond this resolution and also creates a physical problem for Joseph to explain the silence in the gospels. For Kazantzakis’ book, though, the physical problem may have a supernatural cause. On Mary and Joseph’s wedding day, Joseph is struck by lightning and paralyzed, though obviously not to the extent that it prevented their having children (Jesus has brothers, which dispels the idea of Mary’s perpetual virginity). It is interesting that Kazantzakis’ book does not use this event to prevent Mary and Joseph from having children, unlike the accident that Burgess’ book ascribes to Joseph. Joseph’s injury in Kazantzakis’ novel does not preclude at least one aspect of a normal, married life, while Burgess’ novel clearly uses an injury to show that Joseph and Mary’s marriage is not sexually normal.

Before this event, though, Joseph seems blessed by God: “When the marriage candidates were assembled, the staff of Joseph—among so many others—was the only one to blossom” (23). Kazantzakis, like Burgess and Mailer, seems to be drawing on an event from _The Book of James (Protoevanglium)._ There, Mary is dedicated at the temple when she is a child, and, when she is twelve, the priest decides it is time for her to marry. He gathers a group of widowers together, and “a dove leaves the staff of Joseph and flies onto his head”; thus, he must be the man. Joseph tries to argue with the priest, pointing out that he is old and already has sons, but the priest assures him it should be this way (Cunneen 69–71). Although in Kazantzakis’ retelling the event changes from a dove’s leaving Joseph’s staff to his staff’s blossoming, the underlying idea is
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the same. Out of a pool of marriage candidates, Joseph is the one miraculously chosen to be Mary's husband.

It is easy to see both the blossoming of the staff and the lightning strike as evidence that Joseph will be involved with something wonderful, but the lightning strike and paralysis seem nothing more than an effective way to remove Joseph from the remainder of Jesus' life. In fact, he is seldom mentioned when Jesus still lives at home, and, even then, it is only negatively, as Mary seems to have gotten tired of taking care of him. And his removal from the novel seems to make Mary less likeable. Kazantzakis' novel may simply be trying to humanize Mary, tiring of taking care of an invalid for so many years; however, the work provides ample evidence for her humanity elsewhere.

After Jesus’ birth, Ricci's book shows Joseph taking the family to Alexandria because the people of Bethlehem (where Joseph lived and where Jesus was born) know Jesus is not Joseph’s child. In Alexandria, not only do the people not know, they do not care. After Mary has Yaqob (James), Jesus’ brother, Joseph is satisfied with her; however, he favors all the male children Mary has after Jesus. This attitude is not surprising since male heirs are important to carry on the family name and Jesus, in Ricci’s novel, is simply a bastard child, not the result of a virgin birth. Joseph, in fact, is happy when Jesus leaves home when he is ten. An infant girl who is never named dies with no mark on her, and the family thinks that Jesus is the cause: “Yehoceph [Joseph] said, There is a curse on us, and we all understood him to mean Yeshua [Jesus], though he would not say it” (250).

Both Burgess’ and Mailer’s novels portray Joseph much more positively than does Ricci’s. In Burgess’ novel, it is clear Jesus respects Joseph as a true father, though Jesus knows he is not. When Joseph dies of old age, Jesus tells him, “You have had a son’s love, and you will always have it, for, since love is an aspect of our heavenly father and cannot die, so the loved and lover must also live forever” (84). Jesus then takes up carpentry, as he was taught by his father, to keep his earthly father’s business going.

Burgess portrays the relationship between Joseph and Jesus as ideal, in fact, and it lays the groundwork for Jesus’ talking about God as father positively.
However, it makes them into mere types of a father-son relationship rather than a more realistic one. While it is believable that Joseph has accepted Jesus as his true son (or simply the Son of God, which would further influence a positive relationship), it seems unlikely that there would be no tension. Thus, even though Burgess’ novel doesn’t clearly portray Jesus as a perfect child, the implication abides through his relationship with Joseph.

Mailer’s book actually shows Joseph helping to prod Jesus into being more than a carpenter. When Jesus is twelve, Joseph tells Jesus about his miraculous birth. After Jesus is lost on the trip back to Nazareth after visiting Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph find him in the temple speaking with the wise men. As in the gospel account, these men are impressed with Jesus’ wisdom at such an age, so much so that Mary refuses to tell Jesus what he said when he was there, only that “[his] words were so holy she could not repeat them, no more than she could speak the name of the Lord aloud” (8). Jesus, however, forgets this story and forgets what Joseph has told him about his birth until he is praying at Joseph’s funeral eighteen years later. It is at this point that Jesus begins to realize that he is called to be something more than a carpenter.

One of the main questions that comes up when people discuss the divinity of Christ is how or when he knew that he was the Son of God. Interestingly, Mailer’s book uses Joseph as the means to that knowledge. It is difficult to believe, though, that anyone who hears such a story at twelve years old could truly forget that he was the Son of God. While it may be that Mailer’s book is trying to offer a persuasive rationale for why it takes so long for Jesus to begin his ministry, the solution is awkward. It might have been simpler for Joseph to tell Jesus when Jesus is almost thirty and Joseph is about to die.

Ricci’s view of Joseph is more balanced than that of either Burgess or Mailer. Here, Mary spends most of her married life believing she does not love Joseph, but after he dies, she mourns him when she realizes what a good husband he has been to her. She grieves for him and discovers that she loved

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4While Mailer, a Jewish author, has a Joseph who seems to know much about Jesus, Reynolds Price, a Christian, presents a Joseph who does not even know Jesus is God’s son, though he knows that Jesus is not his own (244).
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him. He gave her a better life than she would have had otherwise. He was always good to her (272).

She even appreciates the way he has lived his life, despite what she has been unable or unwilling to do for him: “For here was a man who had worked all his days even to the final one, and who had known little comfort from his wife, whom he had married in disgrace, and yet somehow he had taken meaning from the things of his life, which was only in the birth of his sons and the thought of their prospering” (272).

Joseph is portrayed less positively than in his brief mention in the gospels, where he is willing to put Mary away quietly after she becomes pregnant, but he is also not portrayed negatively, as in some of the other novels. Instead, he is shown to be a typical Jewish man who seeks only an heir to keep his name alive, but who is also fair to those around him. This portrayal suggests a more righteous Joseph than do the others because it makes him more human. Rather than the ideal portrayal in Burgess’ novel or as the cause of Jesus’ knowledge of his divinity in Mailer’s Testament, Joseph is a man simply trying to do what he believes is good, much like many readers. It is the humanizing of Joseph that truly makes this righteousness seem real.

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ adds more to the character of Joseph than do any of the other authors, straying the most from the more common portrayal of Joseph. When Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, Joseph gets a job working at the Temple in order to earn some money, as he and Mary cannot return to Nazareth for thirty days after Jesus’ birth, while Mary is ceremonially unclean from the birth. One day, while Joseph is working, he overhears three soldiers discussing their latest assignment: they are to kill all the children under the age of three.

He immediately leaves work and runs to the cave where he and Mary have been living since their arrival in Bethlehem. Without telling Mary why, he tells her that they have to hide in the cave until morning, then leave before sunrise. Only later does he tell her why. Joseph’s reaction seems credible, but later he is punished for what he did, or, more correctly, what he did not do.
Because he does not warn the other inhabitants of Bethlehem and thinks only of his own child, he is haunted by a nightmare every night for the rest of his life. The nightmare has a detachment of soldiers, “with Joseph himself riding in their midst, sometimes brandishing a sword above his head, and it is just at that moment, when terror overwhelms him, that the leader of the expedition asks, Where do you think you’re going, carpenter. And the poor man, who would rather not say, resists with all his might, but the malignant spirits in the dream are too strong for him, and they prise open his mouth with hands of steel, reducing him to tears and despair as he confesses, I’m on my way to Bethlehem to kill my son” (96). McKendrick argues that Joseph’s decision to save his son makes him a more interesting character: “Yet one of the most decisive twists given to the New Testament . . . is the guilt which Joseph feels, having overheard Herod’s soldiers, for not having warned the parents of Bethlehem. The remorse which haunts Joseph, and which Jesus inherits, is what literally humanizes them” (31). From the first night of his having this dream, Joseph attempts to sleep as little as possible. Mary and the children get used to his thrashing around at night, but the nightmare never goes away.

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ changes how Joseph obtains the knowledge and, possibly, a bit of the knowledge itself in a different way. The biblical account shows Joseph’s being warned in a dream that Herod was “going to search for the child to kill him” (Matt. 2:13). Clearly, the means of Joseph’s receiving the information is not divine but human in Saramago’s work. However, one piece of information is different, as well. In the biblical story, it is not clear if Joseph knows whether or not Herod will kill other children in an attempt to kill Jesus, but the implication is that he does not. By making Joseph aware of this knowledge, Saramago’s book makes him guilty of not attempting to save the other children, enriching him as a character in the process.

Joseph’s guilt also leads to his death, which may relate to his dream. Jesus, at least, thinks that it does, as does a being that appears to Mary (it is unclear at this point in the novel if the being is an angel, a demon or even the Devil):
Herod’s cruelty unsheathed those swords but your selfishness and cowardice were the cords that bound the victims’ hands and feet. . . . You could not have done anything, for you found out too late, but the carpenter could have done something, he could have warned the villagers that the soldiers were coming to kill their children when there was still time for parents to gather them up and escape, to hide in the wilderness, for example, or flee to Egypt and wait for Herod’s death, which is fast approaching. (88)

Because of his selfishness, then, Joseph dies, despite being innocent of the crime for which he is executed. Judas the Galilean is leading a revolt against the Romans, and the Romans strike back by crucifying all the followers they find. Joseph hears that his neighbor, Ananias, who has joined the rebels, has been injured, so Joseph seeks him out. When he is at the camp with Ananias, Roman soldiers come and crucify everyone they find there, despite everyone’s believing Joseph is innocent. His death by crucifixion at the age of thirty-three for a crime he did not commit foreshadows Jesus’ death, as well. Further connecting the two is the fact that Jesus begins to have a nightmare the day Joseph is crucified. He has the same dream as Joseph, save that his is from his point of view. He sees Joseph coming to kill him, but he is a baby again, and, thus, he cannot defend himself.

Like the angel, Jesus believes his father deserves his death because of Joseph’s failure to warn the inhabitants of Bethlehem: “Father murdered the children of Bethlehem. . . . No, Father was to blame, Joseph son of Eli was to blame, because he knew those children were to be killed and did nothing to warn their parents” (151–52). Jesus’ view of Joseph’s actions will later affect why he is willingly crucified, as well.

All of the authors’ novels try to deal with the questions of Joseph and Mary’s other offspring, as well as Joseph’s absence from Jesus’ adult life.

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5Christopher Moore, in *Lamb*, also has Joseph being falsely accused, though the accusation in Moore’s work is that he killed a Roman centurion. The two stories are related, though, as a member of the Sicarii actually killed the centurion. Thus, in both cases, a rebellion is involved with Joseph’s being falsely accused. In Moore’s work, however, Jesus (Joshua in Moore) saves his father from death.
Some, like Saramago’s, present a negative view of Joseph and show him suffering for his inaction; others, like Burgess’ and Mailer’s, show Joseph as one who was loved by Jesus and Mary; Ricci’s novel, however, attempts to create a realistic portrayal of Joseph, one who wanted what other men in his community wanted, but one who was also loving in his own way.