

This photo is available in
the print version of Children.

“The carpenter’s son,” the people of Nazareth would call Jesus in later years. Surely Jesus was taught by his father Joseph the skills and wisdom learned from his own life as a carpenter.

Intently Watching

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The Gospel of Luke mentions just two stories about Jesus' childhood: his presentation in the temple as a newborn (Luke 2:22-39) and his visit to the temple for Passover when he was twelve years old (2:41-52; discussed in "In Her Heart," p. 53), which is the last time the gospels mention Joseph. "In their own town of Nazareth," Luke writes in summarizing those intervening, formative years of growth, "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:39b-40). We must assume, as the many writers of various legends and apocryphal stories throughout the later centuries did, that he was taught by his father Joseph the skills and wisdom learned from his own life as a carpenter. The people of Nazareth associated Jesus with his father: "Is not this Joseph's son?" and "Is not this the carpenter's son?" they wondered when Jesus spoke with prophetic wisdom in their synagogue (Luke 4:22 and Matthew 13:55).

Gerrit van Honthorst draws upon many sources for his painting. He maintains the visual tradition of depicting Joseph as an aged man rather than a peer of Mary, which was begun by Catholic sources.¹ Scripture only hints that Jesus learned carpentry from his father (Mark 6:3; cf. Matthew 13:55, Luke 4:22); the legend that Jesus helped Joseph in the carpentry shop can be found as early as the second century *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. That apocryphal gospel talks about an event within the carpentry studio where Joseph needs two beams of the same length, but one is shorter. Jesus stretches the shorter piece of wood to match the length of the existing piece. The story ends: "And his father Joseph saw it and marveled: and he embraced the young child and kissed him, saying: 'Happy am I for that God hath given me this young child'" (chapter XIII).²

In *Childhood of Christ*, Jesus assists his father by holding a candle to light the piece of wood that Joseph is working on. The light has religious iconographic significance, reminding us that Jesus is the light of the world. It is also stylistically important because Gerrit van Honthorst was the most famous of the Utrecht Caravaggisti, the Dutch followers of the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio. Van Honthorst's inclination to use dramatic lighting in nocturnal scenes (through either sources external to the painting

or light sources from within the composition, such as this centrally-located candle) earned him the Italian nickname “Gherardo delle Notti” (Gerard of the Night Scenes).

Jesus, who appears to be eight or nine years old in this scene, has sought the company of his father as he works into the night. Two angels stand to the right of the composition, but neither Jesus nor Joseph seems to notice their presence. Instead Joseph concentrates on his work and Jesus intently watches his father with admiration and tenderness. Children are especially impressionistic at this age and parents are their most important role models. Van Honthorst’s image reminds us that despite all the forces in our culture competing for children’s attention, their parents continue to have greatest significance for them.

NOTES

1 See Dominic Manganiello, “Joseph the Carpenter,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 413-14.

2 *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (<http://wesley.nnu.edu/noncanon/gospels/inftoma.htm>).



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