

What child is this?: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

by [Frederick A. Niedner](#) in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue

My extended family once had so many males named Frederick that the women in the family assigned each of us a number so the tribe could distinguish between us at family reunions. I became Fred IV. A casual observer might have thought that we considered ourselves royalty, or perhaps a line of renegade popes.

I have a neighbor, Tom Cruse, and a former student, Julia Roberts, who hear all kinds of comedic responses when they use their credit cards or present an ID. In most cases, however, confusion over names produces consternation, not amusement. Rates of criminal identity theft have grown at an astonishing pace, we're told, and its victims find their lives hijacked. We also hear repeatedly of individuals who are hassled every time they try to board an airplane because they happen to have the same name as some suspicious character on a government "no-fly list."

Joseph had no opportunity to consider the potential problems with "Jesus" as a name for his first-born son. He had a strange dream that told him how and why he should name the child with whom his betrothed was scandalously pregnant. He, after all, was named for one of the original kidnapped, hijacked and redirected individuals in his people's long history. Indeed, anyone named Joseph who started having dreams that seemed to come true might as well, for the sake of prudence and personal safety, go hide in a cave. His life was no longer his own. Neither was his beloved nor the child he would raise.

Joseph, however, obeyed the angel in the dream. He took Mary to Bethlehem, and when her time came he named her baby Jesus, just as the angel had directed. Joseph could never have known that somewhere in the same stretch of time another woman among his people bore, birthed and named her child Jesus—or *Yeshua*, as they would have pronounced it. Most likely, lots of parents named their boy babies Jesus back then, much as we commonly assign ours names like Chad and Brett.

Not one but two of those Jesus tots grew up to be men that the authorities feared enough to have arrested. Matthew's story lets us follow Joseph's son Jesus very closely. Yet we don't meet up with the second man, his namesake, until near the

end. There, as the Jesus that readers know best stands before Pilate on trial for his life, we are surprised to meet another Jesus, one whose surname is Barabbas. Mark and Luke say this man was an insurrectionist and murderer, Matthew only that he was “notorious.”

Pilate’s question to the crowd (Matt. 27:17) sounds very confusing, at least to us. “Which Jesus shall I release for you, the one called Barabbas [which means “son of the father”] or the one called ‘Messiah’?” Joseph wasn’t around to see it, apparently, but now the fate and promise embedded in the name of Mary’s unborn child becomes clear. “He shall be called Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” At this point the saving scenario commences. One Jesus goes free, all reasons for his notoriety absolved. The other Jesus takes the full rap. His blood is spilled.

Obviously, Matthew does some preaching and theologizing here. If you bear the name Jesus, he says, then no matter what your crimes are, this other one dies while you go free. But even more than this, *all* the people have the slaughtered one’s blood on themselves and their children, precisely as required in the atonement ritual prescribed in Leviticus 16 and now played out in Pilate’s makeshift sanctuary. Two identical males, one the scapegoat and the other a sacrifice for sin and uncleanness, go to their respective fates as determined by the priests. This is how Joseph’s Jesus saves his people from their sin. His blood works forgiveness of sins for all whom it touches.

Back, then, to Joseph the dreamer and the child he and Mary bring into this world. Important as he became in some ways, even in becoming a saint of the church and having churches and hospitals named for him, Joseph appears as a humane but otherwise ordinary, forgettable fellow with conventional hopes for himself and his family. That is, he’s one of us. He will raise his child as best he knows how and then send the child out into the world where the youngster will get mixed up with and mistaken for all manner of others, many of them notorious.

Among those baptized into Christ, who have taken upon themselves the name of Jesus, these mingled fates and ambiguous identities have both tragic and salutary consequences. Even for pacifist cheek-turners, there is simply no escaping the world of Jesus Barabbas and whatever circumstances brought him face to face with Pilate’s power and caprice. Our children will suffer abuse and die, reckoned, often rightly, among the transgressors. Many of the sins that kill them will be our own. Yet, bearing as they do that other Jesus name, their suffering also comes to us as a sign

like the one given to ancient King Ahaz. Emmanuel, “God with us,” born in the shadow of mighty Assyria so ready to pounce, joins us in our darkness—and he is tiny, hungry, vulnerable and barely noticed.

The Jesus who came once to Joseph’s home, Pilate’s court and the centurion’s killing hill will come again one day. He comes also into the here and now, in the flesh and blood of all who bear his name. Moreover, he always—and only—comes to give his life.

We’d better pay attention to our dreams. Our children aren’t our own any more than Joseph’s child was his. Somewhere out there now may be a child with whom my own child will one day switch lives.