



## Joseph the Smith and the Salvational Transformation of Matter in Early Medieval Europe

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**Abstract.** – In early medieval Western Europe, Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, was identified occupationally not only as a domestic woodworker but also as a blacksmith, the most mysterious, powerful, and sacrosanct category of supernaturally endowed skilled crafting known to traditional nonindustrial societies. After reviewing skilled crafting and especially smithing as ritual processes, this essay considers typological identification of Joseph the smith as earthly parallel of the *Deus artifex* and as symbolic of the purifying (salvational) transformation of earthly matter (humanity) into a more rarefied (spiritual) state by fire as represented metaphorically by metallurgical processes. Aspects of the ideological climate of opinion encouraging such an identification in the early Middle Ages are also discussed. [*St. Joseph, transformation of matter, smithing, early medieval cosmology, metaphors of salvation*]

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In Judeo-Christian sacred lore, as in numerous other religious systems, the ordered cosmos and its creatures are perceived to be the products of skilled crafting by an artisanal deity who first constructed the world by order and design and then created organic forms and beings and imbued them with life.<sup>1</sup> Approaching creativity and artisanry from a more earthly perspective, traditional ideologies, including those of Judaism and Christianity, have long considered highly skilled human craftsmen to be

imbued with uncanny, supernatural talents that, in turn, associate them with the original causal powers and creator-deities of the cosmos (Helms 1993).

This essay discusses Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, as one representative of these extraordinary human artisans. Today Joseph is typically portrayed as a humble, domestically-oriented woodworker with an in-home workshop (Albright and Mann 1971: 172). In earlier Christianity, however, Joseph could be described more broadly as a professional woodwright, builder, stonemason, or blacksmith. I am especially interested in his identification as a smith in early medieval Western Europe (approximately the fourth through the eleventh centuries). During this time Joseph, as a member of the Holy Family, is a very marginal figure in formal Christian theology but, as a smith, he seemingly should stand in company with other metalworkers of lore and legend such as Hephaistos, Tubal-Cain, Wayland, and Volundr, among others, all of whom represent the most mysterious and sacrosanct category of supernaturally endowed skilled crafting known to traditional societies. This essay examines the role and character of Joseph in the contexts of traditional skilled crafting in general and smithing in particular and considers how identification of him as a smith can be understood within the ideological milieu characteristic of Western European Christianity during the early Middle Ages.

1 Genesis 1, 2; Niditch (1985); von Rad (1965).