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Opening Extract from...

The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ

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Mary and Joseph

This is the story of Jesus and his brother Christ, of how they were born, of how they lived and of how one of them died. The death of the other is not part of the story.

As the world knows, their mother was called Mary. She was the daughter of Joachim and Anna, a rich, pious and elderly couple who had never had a child, much as they prayed for one. It was considered shameful that Joachim had never fathered any offspring, and he felt the shame keenly. Anna was just as unhappy. One day she saw a nest of sparrows in a laurel tree, and wept that even the birds and the beasts could produce young, when she could not.

Finally, however, possibly because of their fervent prayers, Anna conceived a child, and in due course she gave birth to a girl. Joachim and Anna vowed to dedicate her to the Lord God, so they took her to the temple and offered her to the high priest Zacharias, who kissed her and blessed her and took her into his care.

Zacharias nurtured the child like a dove, and she danced for the Lord, and everyone loved her for her grace and simplicity.

But she grew as every other girl did, and when she was twelve years old the priests of the temple realised that before long she would begin to bleed every month. That, of course, would pollute the holy place. What could they do? They had taken charge of her; they couldn't simply throw her out.

So Zacharias prayed, and an angel told him what to do. They should find a husband for Mary, but he should be a good deal older, a steady and experienced man. A widower would be ideal. The angel gave precise instructions, and promised a miracle to confirm the choice of the right man.

Accordingly, Zacharias called together as many widowers as he could find. Each one was to bring with him a wooden rod. A dozen or more men came in answer, some young, some middle-aged, some old. Among them was a carpenter called Joseph.

Consulting his instructions, Zacharias gathered all the rods together and prayed over them before giving them back. The last to receive his rod was Joseph, and as soon as it came into his hand it burst into flower.

MARY AND JOSEPH

‘You’re the one!’ said Zacharias. ‘The Lord has commanded that you should marry the girl Mary.’

‘But I’m an old man!’ said Joseph. ‘And I have sons older than the girl. I shall be a laughing-stock.’

‘Do as you are commanded,’ said Zacharias, ‘or face the anger of the Lord. Remember what happened to Korah.’

Korah was a Levite who had challenged the authority of Moses. As a punishment the earth opened under him and swallowed him up, together with all his household.

Joseph was afraid, and reluctantly agreed to take the girl in marriage. He took her back to his house.

‘You must stay here while I go about my work,’ he told her. ‘I’ll come back to you in good time. The Lord will watch over you.’

In Joseph’s household Mary worked so hard and behaved so modestly that no one had a word of criticism for her. She spun wool, she made bread, she drew water from the well, and as she grew and became a young woman there were many who wondered at this strange marriage, and at Joseph’s absence. There were others, too, young men in particular, who would try to speak to her and

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smile engagingly, but she said little in reply and kept her eyes on the ground. It was easy to see how simple and good she was.

And time went past.

The Birth of John

Now Zacharias the high priest was old like Joseph, and his wife Elizabeth was elderly too. Like Joachim and Anna, they had never had a child, much as they desired one.

One day Zacharias saw an angel, who told him ‘Your wife will bear a child, and you must call him John.’

Zacharias was astounded, and said ‘How can that possibly be? I am an old man, and my wife is barren.’

‘It will happen,’ said the angel. ‘And until it does, you shall be mute, since you did not believe me.’

And so it was. Zacharias could no longer speak. But shortly after that Elizabeth conceived a child, and was overjoyed, because her barrenness had been a disgrace and hard to endure.

When the time came, she bore a son. As they were going to circumcise him they asked what he should be called, and Zacharias took a tablet and wrote ‘John’.

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His relatives were surprised, because none of the family had that name; but as soon as he had written it, Zacharias became able to speak again, and this miracle confirmed the choice. The boy was named John.

The Conception of Jesus

At that time, Mary was about sixteen years old, and Joseph had never touched her.

One night in her bedroom she heard a whisper through her window.

‘Mary, do you know how beautiful you are? You are the most lovely of all women. The Lord must have favoured you especially, to be so sweet and so gracious, to have such eyes and such lips . . . ’

She was confused, and said ‘Who are you?’

‘I am an angel,’ said the voice. ‘Let me in and I shall tell you a secret that only you must know.’

She opened the window and let him in. In order not to frighten her, he had assumed the appearance of a young man, just like one of the young men who spoke to her by the well.

‘What is the secret?’ she said.

‘You are going to conceive a child,’ said the angel.

Mary was bewildered.

‘But my husband is away,’ she said.

‘Ah, the Lord wants this to happen at once. I have come from him especially to bring it about. Mary, you are blessed among women, that this should come to you! You must give thanks to the Lord.’

And that very night she conceived a child, just as the angel foretold.

When Joseph came home from the work that had taken him away, he was dismayed beyond measure to find his wife expecting a child. He hid his head in his cloak, he threw himself to the ground, he wept bitterly, he covered himself with ashes.

‘Lord,’ he cried, ‘forgive me! Forgive me! What sort of care is this? I took this child as a virgin from the temple, and look at her now! I should have kept her safe, but I left her alone just as Adam left Eve, and look, the serpent has come to her in the same way!’

He called her to him and said ‘Mary, my poor child, what have you done? You that were so pure and good, to have betrayed your innocence! Who is the man that did this?’

She wept bitterly, and said ‘I’ve done no wrong, I swear! I have never been touched by a man! It

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was an angel that came to me, because God wanted me to conceive a child!’

Joseph was troubled. If this was really God’s will, it must be his duty to look after her and the child. But it would look bad all the same. Nevertheless, he said no more.

The Birth of Jesus, and the Coming of the Shepherds

Not long afterwards there came a decree from the Roman emperor, saying that everyone should go to their ancestral town in order to be counted in a great census. Joseph lived in Nazareth in Galilee, but his family had come from Bethlehem in Judea, some days' journey to the south. He thought to himself: How shall I have them record Mary's name? I can list my sons, but what shall I do with her? Shall I call her my wife? I'd be ashamed. Should I call her my daughter? But people know that she's not my daughter, and besides, it's obvious that she's expecting a child. What can I do?

In the end he set off, with Mary riding a donkey behind him. The child was due to be born any day, and still Joseph did not know what he was going to say about his wife. When they had nearly reached Bethlehem, he turned around to see how she was, and saw her looking sad. Perhaps she's in pain, he

thought. A little later he turned around again, and this time saw her laughing.

‘What is it?’ he said. ‘A moment ago you were looking sad, and now you’re laughing.’

‘I saw two men,’ she said, ‘and one of them was weeping and crying, and the other was laughing and rejoicing.’

There was no one in sight. He thought: How can this be?

But he said no more, and soon they came to the town. Every inn was full, and Mary was crying and trembling, for the child was about to be born.

‘There’s no room,’ said the last innkeeper they asked. ‘But you can sleep in the stable – the beasts will keep you warm.’

Joseph spread their bedding on the straw and made Mary comfortable, and ran to find a midwife. When he came back the child was already born, but the midwife said ‘There’s another to come. She is having twins.’

And sure enough, a second child was born soon afterwards. They were both boys, and the first was strong and healthy, but the second was small, weak, and sickly. Mary wrapped the strong boy in cloth and laid him in the feeding trough, and

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suckled the other first, because she felt sorry for him.

That night there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks on the hills outside the town. An angel appeared to them glowing with light, and the shepherds were terrified until the angel said ‘Don’t be afraid. Tonight a child has been born in the town, and he will be the Messiah. You will know him by this sign: you will find him wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a feeding trough.’

The shepherds were pious Jews, and they knew what *the Messiah* meant. The prophets had foretold that the Messiah, the Anointed One, would come to rescue the Israelites from their oppression. The Jews had had many oppressors over the centuries; the latest were the Romans, who had occupied Palestine for some years now. Many people expected the Messiah to lead the Jewish people in battle and free them from the power of Rome.

So they set off to the town to find him. Hearing the sound of a baby’s cry, they made their way to the stable beside the inn, where they found an elderly man watching over a young woman who was nursing a new-born baby. Beside them in the feeding trough lay another baby wrapped in bands

of cloth, and this was the one that was crying. And it was the second child, the sickly one, because Mary had nursed him first and set him to lie down while she nursed the other.

‘We have come to see the Messiah,’ said the shepherds, and explained about the angel and how he had told them where to find the baby.

‘This one?’ said Joseph.

‘That is what we were told. That is how we knew him. Who would have thought to look for a child in a feeding trough? It must be him. He must be the one sent from God.’

Mary heard this without surprise. Hadn’t she been told something similar by the angel who came to her bedroom? However, she was proud and happy that her little helpless son was receiving such tribute and praise. The other didn’t need it; he was strong and quiet and calm, like Joseph. One for Joseph, and one for me, thought Mary, and kept this idea in her heart, and said nothing of it.

The Astrologers

At the same time some astrologers from the East arrived in Jerusalem, looking, so they claimed, for the king of the Jews, who had just been born. They had worked this out from their observations of the planets, and calculated the child's horoscope with every detail of ascendant and transit and progression.

Naturally, they first went to the palace and asked to see the royal child. King Herod was suspicious, and called for them to come to him and explain.

‘Our calculations show that a child has been born nearby who will be the king of the Jews. We assumed he had been brought to the palace, so we came here first. We have brought gifts—’

‘How interesting,’ said Herod. ‘And where was he born, this royal child?’

‘In Bethlehem.’

‘Come a little closer,’ said the king, lowering his voice. ‘You understand – you are men of the

world, you know these things – for reasons of state I have to be very careful what I say. There are powers abroad that you and I know little about, but they wouldn't hesitate to kill such a child if they found him, and the most important thing now is to protect him. You go to Bethlehem – make enquiries – and as soon as you have any information, come and tell me. I'll make sure that the dear child is looked after safely.'

So the astrologers went the few miles south to Bethlehem to find the child. They looked at their star charts, they consulted their books, they made lengthy calculations, and finally, after asking at nearly every house in Bethlehem, they found the family they were looking for.

'So this is the child who is to rule over the Jews!' they said. 'Or is it that one?'

Mary proudly held out her little weak son. The other was sleeping peacefully nearby. The astrologers paid homage to the child in his mother's arms, and opened their treasure chests and gave gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

'You've come from Herod, you say?' said Joseph.

'Oh, yes. He wants us to go back and tell him

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where to find you, so he can make sure the child is safe.’

‘If I were you,’ said Joseph, ‘I’d go straight home. The king is unpredictable, you know. He might take it into his head to punish you. We’ll take the child to him in good time, don’t worry.’

The astrologers thought this was good advice, and went their way. Meanwhile, Joseph packed their goods hastily, and set off that very night with Mary and the children and went to Egypt, because he knew King Herod’s volatile ways, and feared what he would do.