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Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt, by Anne Rice

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ordination issue is uncalled for, remains unrelated to the history in question, and overshadows the creative works of contemporary sisters faithful to their followers that Fialka was seeking to describe in the final chapters of the text. As such, *Sisters* is an incomplete history of women religious in the United States.

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CHRIST THE LORD: OUT OF EGYPT

ANNE RICE

ALFRED A. KNOPE, 2005

\$25.95 (Hardcover), 336 pages

Reviewed by Frank W. O'Linn

Imagine a childhood in which you are gifted with supernatural power but are uncertain of your own past as you grow curious about your impending future. Welcome to the world of a 7-year-old Jesus Christ, the protagonist in Anne Rice's latest novel, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*. Rice's book is an entertaining read and a valuable teaching tool grounded in research of early Church history and literature. Appropriate for middle school readers through adults, the novel invites readers to walk with Jesus as he discovers for himself his true nature and purpose in life.

This detailed narrative is a suitable introduction to Christology, or the study of the theology of Christ. At the heart of the novel, the first in a series planned by the author, is the mystery of Jesus' nature, that he is at once human and divine. It is important to stress that Rice's book is first and foremost a piece of historical fiction, not an attempt at revising history or the Gospels. It is an opportunity for readers to understand the theme of mystery. As opposed to the mystery stories with which students may be familiar, where a puzzle is solved by the conclusion, this mystery will not be wrapped up neatly by the story's end. Rather, it is a mystery of faith: a spiritual reality that human reason cannot fully comprehend. In this novel, the reader

struggles along with Jesus to understand how his personhood is consubstantial with his divinity.

Narrated in the first person by the young Messiah, Rice's prose deftly balances the dichotomy of Jesus' nature. He is portrayed as a prodigy, truly gifted, but simultaneously perplexed over the purpose of his gifts and his calling in life. Add to this the character of his earthly father, Joseph, who is reluctant to tell him the circumstances of his early years, and the reader is treated to a protagonist on a journey of self-discovery.

The author's plot line, though fiction, is not without foundation. Rice takes creative license with myriad early Christian writings, and exploring the sources that influence the novel affords an opportunity for literary criticism of these early Church writings as well as an appreciation for Rice's meticulous scholarship. The author's writing is in no way contradictory to the biblical accounts of Jesus' childhood. However, given the dearth of information regarding Jesus' youth in the canonical scriptures, Rice draws heavily from the Apocrypha, gospels by early Christians that were not accepted in the Canon of the Catholic Church. The story opens with a powerful hook based on *The Gospel of Thomas* in which the young Jesus unwittingly kills a local bully and subsequently revives him. Likewise, most of the details regarding Jesus' extended family, including his brother, the son of Joseph from a previous marriage, are based on *The Proto-Gospel of James*. Anecdotes of Mary's family lineage and her consecration as a Temple servant who wove veils for the sanctuary likewise originate from this source.

As historical fiction, the author is accurate in descriptions of settings, characters, and the social climate of the time. The novel opens with the Holy Family living in Alexandria, ostensibly their home after they fled Herod's slaughter of the innocents. While the journey to Egypt is present only in *The Gospel of Matthew*, the idea is plausible, as many Jews congregated in the city following the Diaspora. Rice appropriately depicts the role of the synagogue in family life and education, the priests and Pharisees, and the gender roles of Joseph as head of the household and Mary the pious, yet illiterate, nurturer of the clan. Rice's portrayal of Philo, the learned Jewish scholar who sought to reconcile the Bible with Greek thought, is considered accurate by historians. Additionally, historic landmarks such as the lighthouse at Alexandria and, especially, the Temple of Jerusalem are described in precise detail, again based on scrupulous historical research. The author includes a rebellion, based on a minor uprising in 6 A.D. as a major event in the story's plot, and she fittingly portrays the frustration of the Jews in the occupied Holy Land as well as the less-than-just tactics employed by the Romans to keep order.

Many themes present in the story are ripe for exploration. The Jewish nature of the Holy Family plays prominently in the novel as it abides by the

law, is educated in the customs, and participates in the rituals of its culture. Similarly, using the rituals of the Day of Atonement, the theme of the bloody sacrifice of animals for the forgiveness of sins is dwelt upon by the narrator of the story, Jesus, and his brother. Furthermore, while immersed in the turmoil of the Holy Land in transition from Herod's rule, Jesus experiences the desire on the part of the Jewish community for a militant Messiah—a king who will raise an army and reclaim the land of God's chosen people.

As a writer of fiction, Rice is skillful in weaving these varied accounts from numerous historical and early Church sources into a coherent narrative. The appeal is broad: straightforward enough for middle school readers to comprehend, but exhibiting enough depth to entertain even the most knowledgeable Christian scholars. The narrator's words are simple enough to understand; he is, after all, 7 years old at the story's outset. Still, they are powerful, and Jesus is frequently shown to be wise beyond his years. Nevertheless, as much of the profundity dwells in the details, a frequent criticism by younger readers is the slow pace of the story, particularly in the heart of the narrative as the plot line is bogged down by the protagonist's introspection. The conclusion, then, is less of a resolution than an epiphany, where Jesus, then 8 years old, begins to comprehend his past as he contemplates his future.

In the author's notes that follow the story, Rice details her own spiritual journey: a rigid Irish-American Catholic upbringing, a subsequent break with the Church, and an eventual return to the Catholic faith. Researching the Bible and early Christianity, Rice was consumed with discovering the authentic life of Jesus Christ as a sort of devotion, stating, "I consecrated myself and my work to Christ" (p. 309). The depth and gravity of this work has not gone unacknowledged, as *Belief.net* named the novel the *Spiritual Book of the Year* for 2005 and *Amazon.com* lists it among its top-rated spiritual works. Despite notoriety as an occult writer, Rice's latest work has received critical acclaim from numerous Catholic scholars.

In the afterward, Rice describes the aim of the novel: "to take the Jesus of the Gospels, and try to get inside him and imagine what he felt" (p. 320). Ultimately, this story is one writer's guess as to what it might have been like to be a young Jesus as he began to discover the mystery of his true self. Again, this mystery cannot fully be comprehended, and this novel's version, then, is not one that readers should consider to be true. However, that is not to say that it does not convey some truth: that Jesus' nature is both human and divine. Besides being an entertaining story, the book is an opportunity for readers to grow in faith and understanding as they reflect on this mystery.

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