

Review: JAV005

FROM VAMPIRES TO JESUS

a book review of
Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt
by Anne Rice
(Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)

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Anne Rice became famous for her 12 vampire novels, beginning with *Interview with a Vampire*, which are beautifully written, but lurid and disturbing. She has written novels about witchcraft, and, under a pen name, sadomasochistic pornography.

Rice recently announced that she has embraced Christianity. Not only that, she said, "I consecrated myself and my work to Christ" (p. 309). She now refuses to discuss her earlier books, although she does not repudiate them completely. Her latest novel, however, is not about a vampire. It is about Jesus when He was seven years old.

Rice tells about her spiritual pilgrimage in an "Author's Note" appended to her best-selling *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, the first in a planned trilogy on the life of Jesus. She recounts how she grew up in the Roman Catholic Church but abandoned her faith when she went to college. She married a man she describes as "a passionate atheist." Her novels, she writes, reflected her "guilt and...misery in being cut off from God and from salvation...being lost in a world without light" (306-7).

In the course of her research into ancient history, she was struck with "the mystery" of the "survival of the Jews" (308), that is, with how, of all the ancient tribes, this one group—though scattered and persecuted—still survives. Rice said, "It was this mystery that drew me back to God. It set into motion the idea that there may in fact be God. And when that happened there grew in me...an immense desire to return to the banquet table. In 1998 I went back to the Catholic Church...In 2002 I...decided to focus entirely on answering the questions that had dogged me all my life" (309). She decided to give herself "utterly to the task of trying to understand Jesus himself and how Christianity emerged."

Perhaps the most interesting part of her author's note is her description of what she found in reading the biblical scholarship of the liberal higher critics. "They lacked coherence," she said, and "were full of conjecture....Some books were no more than assumptions piled upon assumptions. Absurd conclusions were reached on the basis of little or no data at all....I discovered in this field some of the worst and most biased scholarship I'd ever read" (313-14). The scholarly attempts to discredit the Bible ended up convincing her that it must be true!

A Novel Jesus. Rice then wrote her novel about Jesus. "This is a book I offer to all Christians—to the fundamentalists, to the Roman Catholics, to the most liberal Christians in the hope that my embrace of more conservative doctrines will have some coherence for them in the here and now of the book" (320-21). She adds, "I offer this book to those who know nothing of Jesus Christ in the hope that you will see him in these pages in some form" (321). Despite some Christians' skepticism about the vampire lady, *Christ the Lord* indeed does honor Jesus Christ.

Is it appropriate, however, to write fiction about Jesus? Rice not only makes Him a character in a novel, she presents the whole story using the first-person point of view, and that Person—the “I” of her novel—is the Christ child.

Opinions may differ about that, though fictionalized imaginings of the Bible and even first-person narratives from the point of view of biblical characters frequently can be found in sermons and songs. Most other novels about Jesus—such as Nikos Kazantzakis’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Robert Graves’s *King Jesus*, and Norman Mailer’s *The Gospel According to the Son*—are indeed travesties, in which the authors project their own idiosyncratic views onto the Son of God.

Rice, though, is not doing this at all. She is honestly trying to portray the Christ of historic Christianity, and to imagine what someone who is true God and true man, living in ancient Palestine, might have been like as a seven-year-old boy.

Another controversial point is that Rice draws on apocryphal “infant narratives,” which have the Christ child doing miracles, such as making clay birds come to life and even striking a bully dead. Rice acknowledges that these are “legends” (320), but she uses them to show the divinity of this boy, which He Himself is struggling to understand. In the novel, a bully hits little Jesus, who feels “power go out of me” (3). Like Uzzah, zapped by the holiness of the ark of the covenant, the bully drops dead; but later the young Jesus, sorrowing with the bully’s family, raises him from the dead.

Christ’s first miracle, in reality, was at the wedding at Cana when He turned the water to wine, “the first of his signs” (John 2:11, ESV). Rice is writing fiction, however. If one grants the propriety of exploring the deity and the humanity of Christ by using fiction, having the boy Jesus perform miracles becomes less of an issue.

In fiction, truth inheres not in the made-up incidents, but in their *meaning*; not in the novel’s plot, but in its *theme* and the *message* it communicates. In this sense, Rice is using her fiction to convey orthodox teachings about who Jesus is.

Those legends of the miracles of the Christ child appear in the apocryphal—and heretical—Gnostic gospels, but in her novel Rice works exactly against the matter-denying hyperspirituality of Gnosticism. She instead dramatizes the incarnation (that God came in human flesh in actual human history).

A Historical Setting. Rice gives us a vivid, thoroughly researched immersion into what reference books call “everyday life in Bible times.” She brings the findings of archaeologists and historians to life, showing how people back then worked, what they ate, and what their homes were like. Especially instructive is the way they integrated the Jewish law into their ordinary lives and what it felt like to worship in the Temple.

According to Rice, the young Jesus lived in a tribal society, which meant that He would have been a part of a large extended family. Jesus’ “brothers and sisters,” in Rice’s treatment, were not Mary’s children, but Joseph’s from a previous marriage and adoptions from within the kinship system. This reflects the Roman Catholic teaching of the perpetual virginity of Mary—a view also held by Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli—but Rice uses cultural anthropology to make it somewhat credible, at least as a possibility.

The historical context that Rice supplies is also illuminating. The Bible says that when Herod died, Joseph and his family returned from Egypt, where they had fled to escape the slaughter of the innocents. Joseph feared the new king Archelaus, however, and so moved to Galilee. That was for good reason, as Rice shows, since the new king’s accession was marked by bloodbaths, insurrections, and anarchy, to the point that the Romans were welcomed in many circles as restorers of order.

Through all of this tumult, Jesus grows in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. We see Him being exposed to things He would later use in His ministry—lilies of the field, living water, moneychangers, weddings, and crucifixions.

Throughout the novel, He is a boy—playing, obeying His parents, and telling the tale with simple, childlike language that has profound resonance. Rice has Jesus wondering about who He is, why He can do the things He can do, and what God intends for His life.

At the end of the book, when Jesus is in the temple, He realizes that He is the Son of God. At the same time, having just stood in front of the altar of sacrifice, He realizes that He is “born to die” (300).

A New Believer. Scripture says that a Christian leader should not be “a recent convert” (1 Tim. 3:6). New believers will naturally lack knowledge and spiritual maturity. This is true of Rice as a new believer. She is a Catholic, not an evangelical. She is critical of some of her church’s teachings (e.g., she continues to advocate gay rights), but she does admit that she still has much to learn. We do not make new believers our leaders and follow them uncritically. That does not mean we reject them, however; rather, we must treat them with gentleness, patience, and love.

Despite weaknesses in Rice’s theology and in her novel, for her to have progressed from the tortured darkness of *Interview with a Vampire* to the serene light of *Christ the Lord* is evidence of a profound spiritual transformation. It also is another example of how God often has a way of bringing the least likely converts to Himself.

— reviewed by Gene Edward Veith