

THE CHRIST CHILD, ILLEGITIMACY, AND MEANING OF THE GOSPEL

By Nick Gier

Joseph flew in anger, in anger flew he
Let the father of the baby gather cherries for thee
--Cherry Tree Carol

Some friends and I attended a Christmas concert at the Moscow Presbyterian Church, and our favorite piece was a new version of the Cherry Tree Carol. In the song Jesus, while still in Mary's womb, causes a cherry tree to bow down and give its fruit to Mary. Jesus also foretells his crucifixion and resurrection and he declares that he will be born on January 6. This carol was first sung in America by Celtic immigrants in the Appalachians and the Ozarks, where Christmas was indeed celebrated on that day before the 20th Century.

The story itself may go back to the 9th Century "Infancy Narrative of the Pseudo-Matthew" in which the tree is a date palm. Joseph was unable to climb the tree, so Jesus, now an infant fleeing King Herod, commands: "O tree, bend thy branches and refresh my mother with thy fruit." The obedient date palm was rewarded by being carried up into Heaven.

The Cherry Tree Carol casts Joseph in a much more negative light. When Mary asks him to pick some cherries for her, Joseph lashes out in anger: "Let the father of the baby gather cherries for thee." But after Jesus' miracle Joseph repents of his mean spirited words.

Although the New Testament does not record Joseph's anger, Matthew does state that he did intend to divorce Mary when he discovered that she was

mysteriously pregnant (1:19). An angel came to Joseph in a dream and explained, apparently to his complete satisfaction, that Mary's conception was divinely sanctioned and that his son would "save his people from their sins" (1:21).

The earliest books of the New Testament do not mention Jesus' miraculous conception. In fact, Mark, Paul, and John tell no birth stories, which appear only later when Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels in AD 80-90. Matthew uses a Greek mistranslation of Isaiah 7:14, which in Hebrew has "young woman," not a virgin, and this verse does not refer to the Messiah. Thanks to Matthew, Jesus joins Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, and Mithra as born of virgins. Luke's Roman census and Matthew's account of Herod's slaughter of the infants have no historical basis, so the birth stories may not be reliable sources for an accurate view of Jesus' parentage.

If Jesus was a *mamzerim*, Hebrew for bastard, then he could "not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the Lord" (Deut. 23:2). It has been suggested, however, that the sole sanction against a *mamzerim* in Jesus' time was that he was not permitted to marry, and this may explain why, at least in the Gospel accounts, Jesus did not take a wife.

Matthew and Luke drew most of their information about the adult Jesus from Mark, and these stories say nothing about Jesus' illicit conception. This status would have prevented him from learning the Torah, but Mark has Jesus teaching in the synagogue in "his own country" (6:1-3) where he impressed the people with his religious knowledge.

The fact that Mark refers to Jesus as the "son of Mary" in this passage has led some to infer that he had no legitimate father and this was the reason that the crowd "took offense at him." Scholarly consensus now tends to discount this interpretation, especially since Jesus was also called "son of Joseph" elsewhere.

Matthew borrows Mark's story and adds "the carpenter's son" (13:55), and the fact that Mark also calls Jesus a carpenter is significant because Jewish law would not have allowed Joseph to train a bastard in his trade.

As biblical scholar James McGrath proposes: "The overall tenor of the crowd's comment [in Mark] seems to represent a complaint about Jesus' ordinariness, not his tainted status." A lowly carpenter was not supposed to know the Torah. McGrath concludes: "No matter how one approaches it, the text in Mark 6 confirms rather than denies Jesus' standing in the community as being that of someone of legitimate birth." McGrath also speculates that reason that later scribes left out "carpenter's son" in the text of Mark's gospel was to give the implication of the Virgin Birth that is mentioned only in Matthew.

The Pharisees could have discredited Jesus completely if it were true that Joseph was not his real father. All the direct accusations that Jesus was "born of fornication" and that his father was a Roman soldier named Panthera are from much later and questionable sources. It is quite reasonable to assume that Joseph was Jesus' biological father, and that he would have no good reason to refuse to pick cherries for his pregnant wife.

Orthodox Christian theology does not take the Bible piecemeal as scholars do, so affirming Jesus' illegitimacy, while not historically accurate, may give the gospel message a powerful theological boost. In a short sermon entitled "Embracing the Bastard Jesus," the Rev. Irene Moore tells of the single black mothers in her parish who have been stigmatized as "promiscuous and wild." Moore proposes that the acceptance of Mary "as an unwed mother upholds the ethos that no child, no matter what his or her station in life might be, should be left behind. And it also symbolizes that those relegated to the fringes of society – the bastards – are the very ones that Jesus' birth symbolizes and stands for."

According to Jewish law, Matthew's Joseph had every right to divorce Mary and leave her and her baby to fend for themselves in an unkind world. He may even have had moments of anger, as the Cherry Tree Carol surmises, but he stood by this remarkable woman and even more amazing child. Regardless of our religious persuasions, we can at least agree that Jesus was one of the greatest moral teachers in human history.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. He is indebted to James F. McGrath, "Was Jesus Illegitimate? The Evidence of his Social Interactions," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 5 (2007), pp. 81-100.