

JESUS AS A CHILD

INTRODUCTION

The childhood of Jesus is mentioned in the following apocryphal writings: the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (originally from the second century with later additions as can be found in the Tischendorf edition), the Pseudo-Matthew (6th-7th century and close to the Latin version of the Protoevangelium), the Arabic Infancy Gospel (probably 6th century), and the Irish Versified Narrative (perhaps as early as 700 A.D.)

The scenes of Jesus boyhood have one single purpose; he is to be shown to the world as the one who has superhuman power. He gives life to the clay sparrows, is master of the Sabbath, and shows at an early age that His knowledge is that of the God-Man. Jesus is a healer and restores health and even life.

The portrait of Jesus is a mixture of transcendent and bountiful personality and, at the same time, he acts like an ornery and vengeful little brat. The combination is typical for a clear assessment of both his humanity and his divinity.

A. JESUS AND THE BIRDS

Events dealing with Jesus and the birds follow a similar pattern. Jesus gathers water, makes it clear, clean, and good. He then uses it with clay to make birds, usually twelve sparrows. He does it on a Sabbath. When chastised, he makes the sparrows chirp and fly away. He punishes his accusers.

1. Jesus was angry that the Son of Annas, the Scribe, was dispersing the water which Jesus had collected...And He commanded that he shall wither like a tree. The parents of the boy carried him to Joseph bemoaning their lost child.
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A], 2-3)
2. Jesus, playing outside his home made pools of water, but another child of Annas came and broke up the pools. Jesus complained, "You shall not go on your way, and you shall dry up like a stick"... The father came and complained to Joseph about his dead child. Jesus made 12 sparrows. But it was the Sabbath and one child complained to Joseph. He asked Jesus why he did these things—profaning the Sabbath. Jesus did not answer but said to the sparrows: "Fly away" and they did so". Joseph marveled.
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [B], 2-3)
3. One of the children moved with envy about the passages for water and overthrew what Jesus had built up. Jesus caused him to die. The parents came, complaining. Joseph asked Mary to speak to Jesus. Mary admonished Jesus. Jesus kicked the boy's backside and he came back to life. Again Jesus made 12 sparrows.

People complained to Joseph about Jesus working on the Sabbath...Jesus clapped his hands and the sparrows flew away.

People were filled with astonishment but some complained. The Son of Annas came and broke the dams Jesus had made. Jesus cursed the boy and he withered away and died.

(Ps Matthew 26-28)

4. At age of 7, Jesus playing with his friends, made different animals from clay..., Jesus then told these figures to walk, some to fly, and some to eat from his hand. The other boys told this to their parents who told them not to play with Jesus because he is a wizard.

(Arabic Infancy Gospel, 36)

5. Again on Sabbath, Jesus and some boys made fish ponds. The son of Hanan became angry at their working the Sabbath. Jesus had made 12 sparrows and arranged them around the pond. After Hanan reprimanded them, Jesus clapped his hands and the sparrows flew away. Hanan kicked the pond of Jesus and the water spilled away. But Jesus told him that as the water vanished away so shall his life.

(Arabic Infancy Gospel, 46)

6. A certain Jen upbraided Jesus to his father Joseph for making twelve small birds...Jesus clapped his hands and the birds were scared away.

The son of Annas came and destroyed the work of Jesus...And Jesus said: "May you be as a little branch that falls before its fruit." The boy collapsed like a withered twig.

(N.B. The Koran also makes mention of similar traditions.)

(Irish Versified narrative, 1-10)

B. JESUS CURSES A BOY

This series is based on the following recurring scenarios: Jesus is attacked or vilified by one or several boys; he curses the attacker who dies or is incapacitated. The conversation with Joseph or/and Mary leads to the restoration of the boy's health or life. Almost like a refrain, the stories mention the wonderment of the people, the fact that Jesus' every word becomes immediate deed, the rejection of Jesus and his parents, and the puzzlement of Joseph (and Mary).

1. "Since you have such a child, you cannot dwell with us...Every word he speaks whether good or evil, was a deed and became a miracle."

(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A], 4-5)

2. They complained to Joseph. "Every word he says has an immediate effect...teach your child to bless and not to curse..."

(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A], 4-5)

3. "...at least teach him to bless and not to curse." At the same hour, Jesus seized the dead boy by the ear and lifted him up... And they saw Jesus speaking to him like a father to his son...

(Ps-Matthew, 29)

4. "As you have thrown me down, so you shall fall and not rise again..."

(Arabic Infancy Gospels, 47)

5. ...a boy annoyed Jesus...the boy collapsed; he died on the instant...

Jesus responded to Joseph: 'Anyone who is innocent does not die from judgment...It is only the

wicked that the curse pursues.’
(Irish Versified Narrative, 11-21)

C. JESUS AND THE ALPHABET

“Jesus and the Alphabet” introduces to the Lord’s wisdom and knowledge. He reveals himself, through the mouth of his teachers, as more learned than all the masters. He reads their minds, and declares that he is before all ages. He is not Joseph’s son. He alone knows the unknown mystery symbolized in a letter Alpha (see on this behalf Irenaeus, Adv. Haereses, I, B.1)

I With Zaccheus or Zacharias:

1. Zacchaeus, the teacher said after hearing Jesus...Woe is me...I desired to get a pupil, and I have found I have a teacher. (The child) said: I have come from above to curse them and then call them to things above...
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A],6-8)
2. ...Joseph led him to a certain teacher named Zacchaeus and said: “Take this child, and teach him letters...And when Jesus heard he laughs...You say what things you know, but I understand more things than you; for before the ages I am...Behold, you do not believe me now. When you see my cross than you will believe that I speak the truth!...
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [B], 6-7)
3. Zacharyas, doctor of the law, said...after hearing Jesus, the boy, “I thought I had a scholar. I, not knowing him, have found my master...” ...And Jesus said: ‘...that each may return to his original state, and abide in him who is the root of life and perpetual sweetness.’
(Ps-Matthew, 30-31)
4. Joseph brought Jesus to Zachaeus for instruction... But after listening to Jesus, the Master said to Joseph: “You have brought to me to be taught a boy more learned than all the masters.” To the Lady Mary also he said, “This son of yours has no need of instruction.”
(Arabic Infancy Gospel, 48)

The little boy Jesus answered, ‘Sage of the law of God, you think Joseph is my father. It is not he. ‘I was before your begetting, it is I who am the sage; I know every thought that has been in your heart.’ ...Jesus answered the sage Zacharias. “Thus did I see even you long ago through the mystery of the Holy Spirit; sage of the law, from all time before your begetting, I was.”
(Irish Versified Narrative, 22-39)

II With Another Teacher:

1. Joseph took Jesus to another teacher... “First, I will teach him Greek and then Hebrew... Jesus said to him, “If you are indeed a teacher...tell me the power of the Alpha, and I will tell you that of the Beta.’ And the teacher was annoyed and struck him on the head. The child was hurt and cursed him. He immediately fainted and fell on his face. The child returned to Joseph’s house. He, grieved, commanded his mother, “Do not let him go outside, for all who provoke him die.”
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A], 14)

2. And a second time, Joseph and Mary were told to send Jesus to school. They did so... But the master began to teach in an imperious tone...Jesus responded: 'Tell me first what Beta is, and I will tell you what Alpha is.' The master got angry and struck Jesus...but no sooner had he struck him, that he fell down dead...Joseph was sorrowful...and said 'at some time someone will strike him in malice and he will die.' But Mary answered, 'Do not believe that is possible...he who sent him to be born will himself guard him from all mischief...'
(Ps-Matthew 38)
3. Another instance of the same... Then Joseph said to Mary: "From this time we shall not let him go out of the house, since everyone who opposes him is struck dead."
(Arabic Infancy Gospel, 49)

III With a Third Teacher:

1. ...to another teacher, a third teacher. Though he found the book on the lectern: instead he opened his mouth and spoke by the Holy Spirit... the crowd was amazed! Joseph, worried, went to the school but the teacher said: 'I took the child as a disciple, but he is full of much grace and wisdom. Take him to your house.'
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A],15)
2. Again the Jews asked Mary and Joseph to go to another master to learn...They did so... And Jesus went to the school, took the book out of the hand of the master...and began to read not what was in the book. But he spoke in the Spirit of the Living God...with such power that the master himself fell to the ground and adored him. When Joseph came, the master said to him: "You have given me not a scholar, but a master..."
(Ps-Matthew,39)

D. JESUS AND ZENO

Some stories deal with Jesus' relationship to a boy named Zeno. Zeno falls from the house-top where Jesus and other boys were playing, and is dead. The parents accuse Jesus of having pushed Zeno. He returns the dead boy to life for him to testify in favor of Jesus innocence. The attendance glorifies God for, as Zeno says, "I was dead, you brought me to life."

1. They were playing in the upper story of the house. But one of the children fell down and died... The parents came and accused Jesus. But he leaped down from the roof and said to Zeno. "Arise and tell, did I throw you down?" And he said: "No, Lord, you did not throw me down, but raised me up." And the parents glorified God.
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A], 9)
2. Same story in different wording. (Infancy Gospel of Thomas [B],8)
3. Same story in different wording. (Ps-Matthew,32)
4. Same story in different wording. (Arabic Infancy Narrative, 44)
5. ...his age, I know was seven. One of the boys fell over a cliff and died. They all fled, except Jesus who waited for the crowd...They accused Jesus of causing his death. But Jesus said: "Wait!"

Jesus went to Zeno and asked him, “Is it true that I threw you down?” Zeno responded: Lord it is NOT TRUE...but as he was dead when he fell, he again died after answering Jesus.
(Irish Versified Narrative, 40-44)

E. JESUS' HEALING POWERS

The apocryphals tell a number of stories about the child Jesus' healing powers. He heals a man's foot, heals from viper bite, heals a sick child, a workman, and the poisoned boy. In one instance, Joseph heals in the name of Jesus.

I Jesus Heals a Man's Foot

1. The axe a man uses to cleave wood walls and splits the sole of his foot. Jesus takes his injured foot in his hand and it is healed immediately. He asks the man to remember him. The crowd worships the child because they see the spirit of God at work in him.
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A],10; [B], 9.)

II Jesus Heals James' Viper Bite

- 1+2. Collecting sticks, James the son of Joseph, was bit in the hand by a viper. Jesus breathes upon the bite and James is healed. The creature bursts.
(The Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A] 16: similar story in Arabic Infancy Narrative, 43)
3. The Ps-Matthew presents the same story but puts it into a different setting. James, the first born son of Joseph, gathers vegetables. A viper strikes his hand. Jesus runs up to him and blows on his hand to cool it. James is healed: and the viper dies.
(Ps-Matthew. 41)

III Jesus Heals a Sick Child

1. Jesus runs up to a dead child (frequently he is mentioned as “running quickly” to where the incident happens!), touches his breast and commands him to live. The child looks up and laughs. He intimates the mother to remember him. The bystanders recognize in him God or an angel because his every word is an “accomplished deed”. Jesus continues to play with other children.
(The Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A], 17)

IV Jesus Heals a Workman

1. An accident at a construction site provokes the death of a workman. Jesus goes to the site, takes the man's hand and orders him to rise and do his work. The man worships him, and so do the people praising Him as a gift from heaven.
(The Infancy Gospel of Thomas [A]18)

V The Poisoned Boy

1. A boy, taking eggs from a partridge's nest, was bitten by a venomous serpent. They carry him to the place where Jesus was sitting like a king, and boys standing around him like servants. Seemingly insensitive to the agonizing boy, Jesus invites his entourage to go and kill the serpent. They find the serpent, who submits to Jesus. Jesus tells him to go and suck the poison from the

boy. The serpent sucks out the poison. Jesus curses him, and the serpent bursts asunder. The boy is healed, and Jesus promised that he will be his disciple. He is Simon the Cananaean, mentioned in the Gospel.

(Arabic Infancy Narrative, 42)

VI Joseph Heals in the Name of Jesus

1. Living with his family in Capernaum, Jesus invites his father, Joseph, to go and heal a rich man by the name of Joseph. The man had withered away under his infirmity, and was now dead. Seeing Joseph's reluctance and lack of healing power, he tells him to take the kerchief on his head, to put it on the dead man's face, and to say: "Christ save you". Joseph did as ordered by his son, and life was restored in the rich man, Joseph.

(Ps.-Matthew, 40)

F. JESUS' DOMINION OVER NATURE

The childhood events are replete with miraculous deeds, not only with regard to the sick, dying, and dead, but also when the laws of nature are at stake. Jesus carries water in his garment, stretches beams of wood, produces a miraculous harvest, and tames the wild beasts. Again, the meaning of these stories is to show the supernatural powers of Jesus who, though a child, manifests his divine origin and nature.

I Jesus Fetches Water

- 1+2. His mother gives him a pitcher to draw water for the household. The pitcher is broken but Jesus spreads out his garment, fills it with water and brings it to his mother. Mary keeps to herself the miraculous deed. He was six years old.

(The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, [A]13 and [B]10)

3. In the version of the Pseudo-Matthew a child strikes the pitcher and Jesus takes the water up in his cloak. Mary reflects on/and keeps these things in her heart.

(Ps-Matthew, 33)

4. In the Arabic Infancy Narrative Mary is addressed as Lady. She preserves in her heart what she sees. Here, the cloak becomes a handkerchief.

(Arabic Infancy Narratives, 45)

5. The Irish Versified Narrative, in general very short, tells the same story in two sentences.

(Irish Versified Narrative, 45)

II Jesus Stretched a Beam

1. Jesus helps Joseph as carpenter. When he is commissioned to make a bed the two beams are of unequal length. Jesus takes hold of the shorter piece, and stretching, makes it equal to the other, the longer beam. His father is amazed and thanks God for his child.

(The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, [A], 13)

2. In the version [B] 11 of the same story, Joseph tells Mary. She rejoices, and then glorifies Jesus "with the Father and the Holy Ghost, now and ever and unto the ages of the ages. Amen."

3. In Pseudo-Matthew Joseph is commissioned to build “a couch six cubits long”. His servant blunders and cuts two uneven pieces of wood. In this and other stories it is implied that Joseph was used to making ox-yokes, ploughs, and implements of husbandry, but may have lacked the skills to build a couch.
(Ps-Matthew, 37)
4. In the Arabic Infancy Narratives, Joseph and Jesus work as a team, and make it a habit that whenever Joseph had to make anything longer or shorter, the Lord Jesus (sic!) would stretch out his hand and comply with his father’s wish.
(Arabic Infancy Narratives, 38)
5. In the Irish Versified Narrative, short as ever, Jesus simply says: “Take your part: I shall take mine”, and both beams are even.
(Irish Versified Narrative, 47-48)

III Jesus Sows a Field

1. Joseph and Jesus sow corn. The child sows only one grain of corn, but he brings in a hundred measures. He then gives the corn to the poor of the village. Joseph takes the residue.
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas, [A], 12)
2. Jesus goes into the field to sow “a little wheat”. It grows and “multiplies exceedingly”. In the end he gathers a produce of three kors which he distributes to acquaintances.
(Ps-Matthew, 34)
3. A different, the Irish Version, uses leeks. Jesus has only a little field but harvests a hundred basketfuls of leeks.
(Irish Versified Narrative, 46)

IV Jesus and the Throne

1. Only mentioned in the Arabic Infancy Narratives, this story uses the same motif as the beam-stretching account. Joseph builds a throne for the King, a labor which takes two years. In the end, the throne lacks “two spans of the prescribed measure.” Joseph confides in the Lord Jesus (sic!) who consoles him. Each having stretched his own side, the throne is brought to the exact measure of the place. The woods used were of many kinds, and celebrated in the time of Solomon. The bystanders are astonished and praise God.
(Arabic Infancy Narratives, 3a)

V Jesus and the Dyer

1. Jesus passes the workshop of a dyer named Salem. He collects the clothes he finds in the workshop and puts them in a tub full of indigo. Salem calling Jesus Son of Mary, is devastated. “You spoiled everything and destroyed my reputation, for each one of the garments was to have a different color. Jesus goes and takes the clothes out of the tub, each of them in the color the dyer wished. The Jews praised God.
(Arabic Infancy Narrative, 37)

VI Jesus and the Lions

1. Pseudo-Matthew tells the story of Jesus spending time in the company of the lions living near the bank of the Jordan, in the proximity of Jericho. It was not safe to approach the cave where a lioness nursed her whelps. Jesus, however, enters the cave. The lions worship him and play with him. The crowd sees in Jesus' action a sure sign of grievous sins committed by his parents or himself. But Jesus exits the cave, and with him the lions. Jesus addresses the people: "How much better are the beasts than you, seeing that they recognize their Lord and glorify him; while you men, who have been made in the image and likeness of God, do not know him!" In sight of everybody, Jesus crosses the Jordan with the lions. The water is divided on the right and on the left. He sends the lions back intimating them not to hurt anybody, adding, "Neither let man injure you..." Then he returns to his mother.
(Ps.-Matthew, 35-36)

G. JESUS' AUTHORITY OVER PEOPLE

Whether sharing a meal with his family, playing with fellow kids, or conversing with the learned, his authority and the influence he has on people is unmistakable. He is the little king.

I Jesus the King

1. Jesus gathers the boys "after the manner of a king". They spread their clothes, he sits on them, and is crowned with a crown. The boys drag people in front of him, and bid them to adore the king.
(Arabic Infancy Narrative. 41)

II Jesus and the Kids

1. A group of boys, hiding from him, are punished. He changes the boys into goats, and orders them to leave the house where they were hiding. Women present at the scene ask for his mercy. He answers that the "sons of Israel are like the Ethiopians among the nations", but eventually takes pity and restores the kids to their former condition, telling them: "Come, boys, let us go and play."
(Arabic Infancy Narratives, 40)

III Jesus Shares and Meal with His Family

1. This story, only in Pseudo-Matthew, tells of the utmost respect given to Jesus by his whole family, that is Joseph and Mary, her sister Mary, daughter of Cleophas and Anna, the parents of Jesus' mother, as well as James, Joseph, Judah, and Simeon, the sons of Joseph, and his two daughters. Jesus blesses them, is the first to eat and drink, and when absent no one dares to take refreshments, not even Joseph or Mary. He is feared and observed. He was considered "a lamp before their eyes". When Jesus sleeps the brightness of God shines upon him.
(Ps-Matthew, 42)

IV Jesus in the Temple at the Age of Twelve

Luke's perikope (2. 41-51) is rendered in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and in the Arabic Infancy Narrative.

1. Following the gospel text, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas ([A], 1a) highlights the importance of Mary. The Scribes and Pharisees address her in these words: “Blessed are you among women, because God has blessed the fruit of your womb. For such glory and such excellence and wisdom we have never seen nor heard.” Jesus follows his mother, and was subject to his parents. The mother stores up what has happened.
(Infancy Gospel of Thomas, [A] 1a)

2. The Arabic Infancy Narrative goes into greater detail. Jesus questions the scribes about whose son is the Messiah? They answer, “The Son of David”. He connects his answer with the divine origin of the Messiah.

Asked by an astronomer whether he had studied astronomy, he explains the number of “spheres, and of heavenly bodies, their natures and operations, their opposition; their aspect, triangular, square, and sextile”.

He is asked whether he has studied medicine, and Jesus explains “physics, and metaphysics, hyperphysics and hypophysics, the powers likewise and humours of the body, and the effects of the same...” He teaches anatomy, psychology (the operations of the soul upon the body), and the interaction between psychology and morals. His exposition is qualified as being beyond “the reach of any created intellect”.

The scribes and scholars ask Mary whether Jesus were her son. When she confirms, they say in amazement: “Blessed are you, O Mary, who have brought forth such a son.
(Arabic Infancy Narrative, 50-53)

Both versions follow closely the overall pattern of Luke’s perikope (Lk 2:41-51)

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