



# On Jesus as a Trickster Child, and the Unpredictable Narratives in Medieval Manuscripts

Marijana Vuković, University of Southern Denmark

*Marijana Vukovic is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Southern Denmark and a visiting researcher at the Centre for Medieval Literature (Odense). She currently runs the project as a Principal Investigator (January 2024-December 2025). She studied Classical Philology at the University of Belgrade (2001) and holds an MA degree in Medieval Studies from the Central European University, Budapest (2007). She obtained two Ph.D. degrees, one in Medieval Studies from the Central European University in Budapest (2015), and another in Religious and Literary History of the Middle Ages from the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas of the University of Oslo (2018). Her previous post-doctoral positions include the University of Warsaw (2018), where she worked within the ERC Project “The Cult of Saints,” based at the University of Oxford and the University of Southern Denmark (2020-2023), where she worked within the project “Retracing Connections: Byzantine Storyworlds in Greek, Arabic, Georgian, and Old Slavonic (c. 950–c. 1100).”*

It seems unlikely that the foremost person in Christianity – Jesus – would ever appear in a Christian narrative as a child who gets up to mischief, brings harm to his peers and teachers, or generally acts in a way atypical for a child that he is expected to be. However, according to an apocryphal narrative entitled *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, he acted in such a way in his childhood and adolescence, from the age of five to twelve. Much of his relations with other people, children, and his parents, Mary and Joseph, go wrong in many versions of this text in various languages and manuscripts.

We learn from the narrative that Jesus played at the ford of a rushing stream after rain as a five-year-old boy. He gathered water into pools, making them clean, and molded sparrows out of soft clay (on a Sabbath, though), which caused an uproar among the Jews. When they complained to Jesus’ father, Joseph, Jesus quickly turned the sparrows into living creatures to help them fly away. When a Jewish child, in return, destroyed his pools, he threw a curse and killed him. On another occasion, colliding



Figure 1. The illustration of the episode “Jesus makes the birds come alive” in the Latin manuscript Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, L 58 sup.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2. Jesus makes the birds come alive in the movie “The Young Messiah”<sup>2</sup>

with a boy in the street, he likewise threw a curse, and the boy dropped dead. The Jewish mob again complained to Joseph, wishing to force them out of the village. As an act of revenge, Jesus blinded them all.

He was no better in school. On three attempts to get an education in this story, he was expelled at least two times. Knowing already what he was supposed to learn in school, he pretended not to know anything and kept silent. When the teachers punished him for his silence, Jesus killed them, too.

Not all of his behavior is notorious in the story. He retrieved the eyesight of those he had previously blinded. He revived from death a child who fell from a house’s roof. He helped his mother bring water from a well, sowed crops with his father, did carpentry, and helped his brother collect wood in the forest. Jesus also performed several healing miracles in this text.

Scholars still need to determine when the original text of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* first emerged. According to the testimony of Irenaeus of Lyons (*Against Heresies*, 1.20.1), an episode describing Jesus and his teacher circulated, possibly independently, already in the second century. The text may have been composed between 125 and 185 CE in Asia Minor, Egypt, or Antioch. The cutting-edge scholarship inclines towards Egypt as the place of the story’s origin.

Besides the murkiness of the story’s contents, the text had an incredibly intricate transmission that would amaze even those who studied some of its parts through individual manuscripts and languages. Such a complex textual situation begs the question of what constitutes the core of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. The text’s fluidity challenged the very definition of text as a composition with a fixed beginning and end.

In the various manuscripts and the form(s) that we know of,

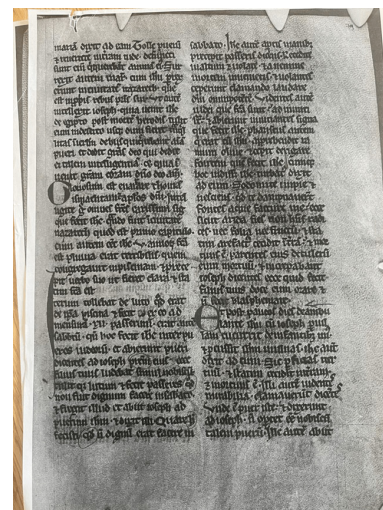


Figure 3. An uncertain beginning of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 288, f. 79r



the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* occupies from four up to twenty-two manuscript folios. The text has no established beginning or end; various manuscripts have different beginnings and endings. Due to its episodic character, which is an essential characteristic of its narrative structure, the different versions of the text take episodes in and out according to their preferences and purposes. The episodes of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* are sometimes differently aligned in manuscripts. Finally, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is occasionally copied with other texts as part of a story cycle or of another text, sometimes even without the title.

Speaking of the titles, no manuscript or version of the text bears the title “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” which is established as a scholarly convention. Some scholars use other modified appellations to designate the text, such as *The Childhood Deeds of Jesus*, *Paidika*, or *The Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Thomas*.

The text’s title transformed almost from manuscript to manuscript. To illustrate it with several examples: in an eleventh-century Greek codex

(Jerusalem, Library of the Greek Patriarchate, Sabaiticus 259, f. 66r), the text opens with the following lines: Τὰ παιδικὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ δεσπότου ἡμῶν καὶ σωτῆρος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. In an eleventh-century Latin manuscript (Paris, BnF, lat. 1772, f. 88v), the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* provides a different introduction: *De infantia d[omi]ni n[ost]ri I[hes]u Chr[ist]i; Incipit infantia d[omi]ni n[ost]ri I[hes]u Chr[ist]i. Postqua[m] reversus est in Galilea de Egipto.*

In a Latin twelfth-to-thirteenth-century manuscript (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 288, f. 79r), the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* starts without a title as a continuation of the previous text. One can guess the beginning of the text only by a larger capital letter.

In a thirteenth-century Greek manuscript (Vienna, ÖNB, Theol. gr. 123, f. 192r), the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* also begins without a title from the phrase μνημόνευέ μου (“remember me”), which appears in the middle of a sentence in episode 10. The text in the manuscript is incomplete and reduced to a few pages (192r-193v), covering approximately half of the episodes. Unlike in the Latin tradition, the text is not connected to the other texts around it.



Figure 4. Jesus’ family on the way to Nazareth in the movie “The Young Messiah”<sup>3</sup>



In a fourteenth-century Latin manuscript (Berne, Burgerbibliothek, 271, f. 41r), the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* appeared entitled *Tractatus Thomae hysmaelite de operibus ihesu post regressionem eius de egypto*, while a fifteenth-century Greek manuscript from Vienna (Austrian National Library, Cod. hist. gr. 91, f. 199v), opened the text with the following title: Λόγος ἰσραηλίτ[ου] φιλοσόφου εἰς τὰ παιδικὰ κεφάλαια τοῦ κ[υρίου] ἡμῶν Ἰ[ησοῦ] Χ[ριστοῦ]. Κύριε ἐ[λέη]σον. One Old Slavonic fourteenth-century manuscript from Moscow (Russian State Historical Museum, Collection of A. I. Hludov, Cod. 162, f. 200v) started the text with the title *Reading of the Childhood of Jesus Christ* (Чтениѣ дѣтства Ис[уса] Х[ристов]а), and another, from St Petersburg (Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 13.3.17, f. 177r), opened it with the line *Deeds and childhood of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Дѣаніа и дѣтство Г[оспод]а наше[го] И[сус]а Х[рист]а).

Not only do the titles of this text need to be clarified. What adds to the complexity is that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* – mainly in the Latin tradition – was often integrated into a story cycle – a “family history” – called the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. This “gospel” consisted of several originally independent texts, now constituting a sequence of events in the life of Jesus’ family, starting with Mary’s childhood (*Protoevangelium of James*) and proceeding with her adult years when Jesus was a two-year-old boy during their refuge in Egypt (*Prologue in Egypt*). The cycle commonly ended with Jesus’ childhood from the age of five to twelve (*Infancy Gospel of Thomas*). The sequence was followed by other episodes from the life of Mary or her parents, Joachim and Anne.

The entire cycle, specifically the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* within it, would sometimes end the narrative flow abruptly in the middle of a sentence. In the Latin manuscript Paris, BnF, lat. 1772, for example, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* ends in the middle of a sentence on folio 90r after a few episodes. The layout immediately continues with another text, Augustine’s *Sermons on St. Vincent*.

The richness of the material evidence of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* will not stop surprising us soon. The text continues its afterlife into modern times through various media. In 2016, the movie was released according to the story, entitled *The Young Messiah*. Represented as a biblical drama, directed by Cyrus Nowrasteh and co-written by Betsy and Cyrus

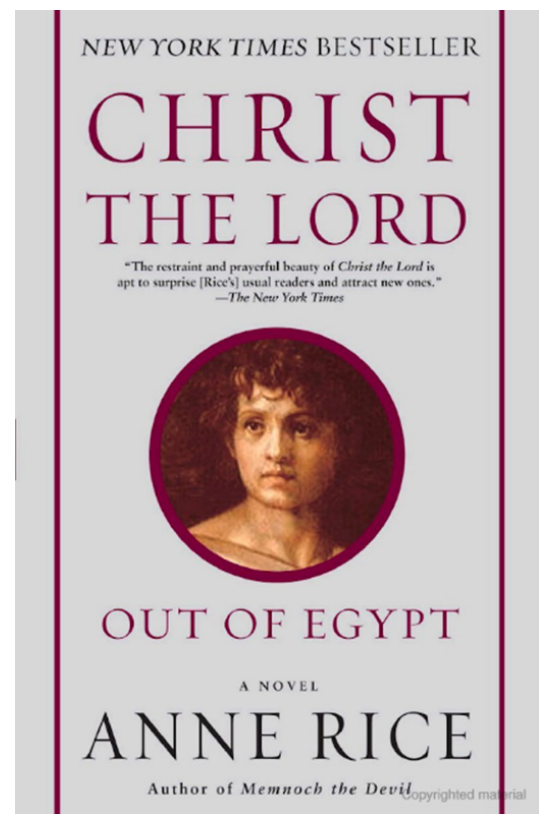


Figure 5. The book by Anne Rice<sup>4</sup>



Nowrasteh, the movie is based on the novel *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, written by Anne Rice.

Just glancing, one notices that the movie's plot has transformed. Jesus' colliding with another boy who drops dead turns into a proper street fight with the same outcome. The scene of making a bird alive is simplified, spotlighting only Jesus' miracle and omitting the audience – Jews – leaving only a few cousins to witness the miraculous event. The plot relies on one of the lesser-known textual versions, where Jesus' family relocates from Alexandria to Nazareth, Galilee, and where his parents, Joseph and Mary, are fully aware of Jesus' divine nature, trying to conceal it from the rest of the world.

This variety of narrative containers allows us to trace the narrative transformations from antiquity until modern times. We must still decide whether such a textual destiny was related explicitly to apocryphal texts in the Middle Ages or whether it was a broader textual phenomenon. The possible unfavorable textual treatments in the past mean so much to us today since they allow us to follow all the steps of the textual afterlife of these stories in need of constant revision. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* provides an excellent example of how such stories survive, live, and outgrow their authors' initial ideas and intentions over centuries.



Figure 6. The poster of the movie “The Young Messiah”<sup>5</sup>

***This article is reprinted with kind permission from the Retracing Connections Project; this project's blog and more details may be found at <https://retracingconnections.org>***

## Image Source Notes

<sup>1</sup>Source: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t9c56b324&view=1up&seq=3>; Angelo Della Croce, Canonical histories and apocryphal legends relating to the New Testament represented in drawings with a Latin text: a photo-lith reproduction from an Ambrosian MS. executed for James Gibson-Craig (Milan: Ambrosian Library, 1873), 13.

<sup>2</sup>Source: <https://www.theyoungfolks.com/review/74732/the-young-messiah-movie/> Last accessed: 05/07/2023.

<sup>3</sup>Source: [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1002563/mediaviewer/rm1089214720?ref\\_=ttmi\\_mi\\_all\\_sf\\_12](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1002563/mediaviewer/rm1089214720?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_12) Last accessed: 05/07/2023.

<sup>4</sup>Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ\\_the\\_Lord:\\_Out\\_of\\_Egypt#/media/File:ChristTheLordOutOfEgypt.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_the_Lord:_Out_of_Egypt#/media/File:ChristTheLordOutOfEgypt.jpg) Last accessed: 05/07/2023.

<sup>5</sup>Source: <https://said-fred.blogspot.com/2016/06/review-of-young-messiah-apocryphal.html> Last accessed: 05/07/2023.