

CHRIST  
THE LORD



OUT OF  
EGYPT

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A NOVEL

ANNE RICE



ROSS TAFARO

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# **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

EVERY NOVEL I've ever written since 1974 involved historical research. It's been my delight that no matter how many supernatural elements were involved in the story, and no matter how imaginative the plot and characters, the background would be thoroughly historically accurate. And over the years, I've become known for that accuracy. If one of my novels is set in Venice in the eighteenth century, one can be certain that the details as to the opera, the dress, the milieu, the values of the people—all of this is correct.

Without ever planning it, I've moved slowly backwards in history, from the nineteenth century, where I felt at home in my first two novels, to the first century, where I sought the answers to enormous questions that became an obsession with me that simply couldn't be ignored.

Ultimately, the figure of Jesus Christ was at the heart of this obsession. More generally, it was the birth of Christianity and the fall of the ancient world. I wanted to know desperately what happened in the first century, and why people in general never talked about it.

Understand, I had experienced an old-fashioned, strict Roman Catholic childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, in an

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Irish American parish that would now be called a Catholic ghetto, where we attended daily Mass and Communion in an enormous and magnificently decorated church, which had been built by our forefathers, some with their own hands. Classes were segregated, boys from girls. We learned Catechism and Bible history, and the lives of the saints. Stained-glass windows, the Latin Mass, the detailed answers to complex questions on good and evil—these things were imprinted on my soul forever, along with a great deal of church history that existed as a great chain of events triumphing over schism and reformation to culminate in the papacy of Pius XII.

I left this church at age eighteen, because I stopped believing it was "the one true church established by Christ to give grace." No personal event precipitated this loss of faith. It happened on a secular college campus; there was intense sexual pressure; but more than that there was the world itself, without Catholicism, filled with good people and people who read books that were strictly speaking forbidden to me. I wanted to read Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus. I wanted to know why so many seemingly good people didn't believe in any organized religion yet cared passionately about their behavior and the value of their lives. As the rigid Catholic I was, I had no options for exploration. I broke with the Church. And I broke with my belief in God.

When I married two years later, it was to a passionate atheist, Stan Rice, who not only didn't believe in God, he felt he had had something akin to a vision which had given him a certainty that God didn't exist. He was one of the most honorable and conscience-driven people I ever knew. For him and for me, our writing was our lives.

In 1974, I became a published writer. The novel reflected my guilt and my misery in being cut off from God and from

salvation; my being lost in a world without light. It was set in the nineteenth century, a context I'd researched heavily in trying to answer questions about New Orleans, where I was born and no longer lived.

After that, I wrote many novels without my being aware that they reflected my quest for meaning in a world without God. As I said before, I was working my way backwards in history, answering questions for myself about whole historical developments—why certain revolutions happened, why Queen Elizabeth I was the way she was, who really wrote Shakespeare's plays (this I never used in a novel), what the Italian Renaissance really was, and what had the Black Death been like before it. And how had feudalism come about.

In the 1990s, living in New Orleans again, living among adults who were churchgoers and believers, flexible Catholics of some sophistication, I no doubt imbibed some influence from them.

But I also inevitably plunged into researching the first century because I wanted to know about Ancient Rome. I had novels to write with Roman characters. Just maybe, I might discover something I'd wanted to know all my life and never had known:

How did Christianity actually "happen"? Why did Rome actually fall?

To me these were the ultimate questions and always had been. They had to do with who we were today.

I remember in the 1960s, being at a party in a lovely house in San Francisco, given in honor of a famous poet. A European scholar was there, I found myself alone with him, seated on a couch. I asked him, "Why did Rome fall?" For the next two hours he explained it to me.

I couldn't absorb most of what he said. But I never forgot what I did understand—about all the grain for the city hav-

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

ing to come from Egypt, and the land around the city being taken up with villas, and the crowds being fed the dole.

It was a wonderful evening, but I didn't leave with a feeling that I had the true grasp of what had happened.

Catholic Church history had given me an awareness of our cultural heritage, although it was presented to me early and quite without context. And I wanted to know the context, why things were the way they were.

When I was a little child, maybe eleven or younger, I was lying on my mother's bed, reading or trying to read one of her books. I read a sentence that said the Protestant Reformation split Europe culturally in half. I thought that was absurd and I asked her, was this true? She said it was. I never forgot that. All my life I wanted to know what that meant.

In 1993, I dug into this early period, and of course went earlier, into the history of Sumer and Babylon and the whole Middle East, and back to Egypt, which I'd studied in college, and I struggled with it all. I read specialized archaeological texts like detective novels searching for patterns, enthralled with the Gilgamesh story, and details such as the masonry tool which the ancient kings (statues) held in their hands.

I wrote two novels during this period that reflect what I was doing. But something happened to me that may not be recorded in any book.

I stumbled upon a mystery without a solution, a mystery so immense that I gave up trying to find an explanation because the whole mystery defied belief. The mystery was the survival of the Jews.

As I sat on the floor of my office surrounded by books about Sumer, Egypt, Rome, etc., and some skeptical material about Jesus that had come into my hands, I couldn't understand how these people had endured as the great people who they were.

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 for whatever reason an immense desire to return to the banquet table. In 1998 I went back to the Catholic Church.

But even then I had not closed in on the question of Jesus Christ and Christianity. I did read the Bible in a state of utter amazement at its variety, its poetry, its startling portraits of women, its inclusion of bizarre and often bloody and violent details. When I was depressed, which was often, someone read the Bible to me, often literary translations of the New Testament—that is, translations by Richmond Lattimore that are wondrously literal and beautiful and revealing and that open the text anew.

In 2002 I put aside everything else and decided to focus entirely on answering the questions that had dogged me all my life. The decision came in July of that year. I had been reading the Bible constantly, reading parts of it out loud to my sister, and poring over the Tanach (Old Testament), and I decided that I would give myself utterly to the task of trying to understand Jesus himself and how Christianity emerged.

I wanted to write the life of Jesus Christ. I had known that years ago. But now I was ready. I was ready to do violence to my career. I wanted to write the book in the first person. Nothing else mattered. I consecrated the book to Christ.

I consecrated myself and my work to Christ. I didn't know exactly how I was going to do it.

Even then I did not know what my character of Jesus would be like.

I had taken in a lot of fashionable notions about Jesus—that he'd been oversold, that the Gospels were "late" documents, that we really didn't know anything about him, that violence and quarreling marked the movement of Christian-



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

ity from its start. I'd acquired many books on Jesus, and they filled the shelves of my office.

But the true investigation began in July of 2002.

In August, I went to my beach apartment, to write the book. Such naivete. I had no idea I was entering a field of research where no one agreed on anything—whether we are talking about the size of Nazareth, the economic level of Jesus' family, the Jewish attitudes of Galileans in general, the reason Jesus rose to fame, the reason he was executed, or why his followers went out into the world.

As to the size of the field, it was virtually without end. New Testament scholarship included books of every conceivable kind from skeptical books that sought to disprove Jesus had any real value to theology or an enduring church, to books that conscientiously met every objection of the skeptics with footnotes halfway up the page.

Bibliographies were endless. Disputes sometimes produced rancor.

And the primary source material for the first century was a matter of continuous controversy in which the Gospels were called secondary sources by some, and primary sources by others, and the history of Josephus and the works of Philo were subject to exhaustive examination and contentions as to their relevance or validity or whether they had any truth.

Then there was the question of the Rabbis. Could the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Talmuds be trusted to give an accurate picture of the first century? Did they actually mention Jesus? And if not, so what, because they didn't mention Herod, who built the Temple, either.

Oh, what lay in store.

But let me backtrack. In 1999, I had received in die mail from my editor and longtime mentor a copy of Paula Fredriksen's *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*. I had read a

substantial part of this book in which Fredriksen re-created beautifully the Jewish milieu in which the boy Jesus might have lived in Nazareth and in which he might have gone to the Temple for Passover along with his family. Fredriksen made the point strongly that Jesus was a Jew. And that this had to be addressed when one wrote about him or thought about him, or so it seems to me.

Now six years later, I have produced a book which is obviously inspired by that scene which Fredriksen wrote, and I can only offer my humble thanks to her and acknowledge her influence.

Of course my beliefs are the polar opposite of Fredriksen's as the book *Christ the Lord reveals*. But it was Fredriksen who steered me in the right direction as to exploring Jesus as a Jew, and there my serious research of him began.

But to return to the year 2002. As I began my serious work, a call came from my husband. He was experiencing the first symptoms of a brain tumor from which he died in less than four months.

We had been married for forty-one years. After my return to the Church, he had consented to marry me in the great old church of my childhood with a priest who was my cousin saying the words. This was a marvelous concession coming from a committed atheist. But out of love for me, my husband did it. Forty-one years. And he was gone.

Was I given the gift of purpose before this tragedy so that it would sustain me through it? I don't know. I do know that during his last weeks, my husband when he was conscious became a saint. He expressed love for those around him, understanding of people he hadn't understood before. He wanted gifts given to those who helped him in his illness. Before that he had managed, though half paralyzed, to create three amazing paintings. I must not neglect to say that. Then

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

after that period of love and understanding, he slowly lapsed into a coma, and was gone.

He left more than three hundred paintings, all done in fifteen years, and many books of poetry, most published during the same period, and thousands of unpublished poems. His memorial gallery will soon move from New Orleans to Dallas, Texas, where he was born.

I went on with my quest right through his illness and his death. My books sustained me. I told him about what I was writing. He thought it was wonderful. He gave me glowing praise.

From that time on, December 2002 when he died, until 2005, I have studied the New Testament period, and I continue to study. I read constandy, night and day.

I have covered an enormous amount of skeptical criticism, violent arguments, and I have read voraciously in the primary sources of Philo and Josephus which I deeply enjoy.

Having started with the skeptical critics, those who take their cue from the earliest skeptical New Testament scholars of the Enlightenment, I expected to discover that their arguments would be frighteningly strong, and that Christianity was, at heart, a kind of fraud. I'd have to end up compartmentalizing my mind with faith in one part of it, and truth in another. And what would I write about my Jesus? I had no idea. But the prospects were interesting. Surely he was a liberal, married, had children, was a homosexual, and who knew what? But I must do my research before I wrote one word.

These skeptical scholars seemed so very sure of themselves. They built their books on certain assertions without even examining these assertions. How could they be wrong? The Jewish scholars presented their case with such care. Cer-

tainly Jesus was simply an observant Jew or a Hasid who got crucified. End of story.

I read and I read and I read. Sometimes I thought I was walking through the valley of the shadow of Death, as I read. But I went on, ready to risk everything. I had to know who Jesus was—that is, if anyone knew, I had to know what that person knew.

Now, I couldn't read the ancient languages, but as a scholar I can certainly follow the logic of an argument; I can check the footnotes, and the bibliographical references; I can go to the biblical text in English. I can check all the translations I have and I have every one of which I know from Wycliffe to Lamsa, including the New Annotated Oxford Bible and the old English King James which I love. I have the old Catholic translation, and every literary translation I can find. I have offbeat translations scholars don't mention, such as that by Barnstone and Schonfield. I acquired every single translation for the light it might shed on an obscure line.

What gradually came clear to me was that many of the skeptical arguments—arguments that insisted most of the Gospels were suspect, for instance, or written too late to be eyewitness accounts—lacked coherence. They were not elegant. Arguments about Jesus himself 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.

In sum, the whole case for the nondivine Jesus who stumbled into Jerusalem and somehow got crucified by nobody and had nothing to do with the founding of Christianity and would be horrified by it if he knew about it—that whole picture which had floated in the liberal circles I frequented as an atheist for thirty years—that case was not

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

made. Not only was it not made, I discovered in this field some of the worst and most biased scholarship I'd ever read.

I saw almost no skeptical scholarship that was convincing, and the Gospels, shredded by critics, lost all intensity when reconstructed by various theorists. They were in no way compelling when treated as composites and records of later "communities."

I was unconvinced by the wild postulations of those who claimed to be children of the Enlightenment. And I had also sensed something else. Many of these scholars, scholars who apparently devoted their life to New Testament scholarship, disliked Jesus Christ. Some pitied him as a hopeless failure. Others sneered at him, and some felt an outright contempt. This came between the lines of the books. This emerged in the personality of the texts.

I'd never come across this kind of emotion in any other field of research, at least not to this extent. It was puzzling.

The people who go into Elizabethan studies don't set out to prove that Queen Elizabeth I was a fool. They don't personally dislike her. They don't make snickering remarks about her, or spend their careers trying to pick apart her historical reputation. They approach her in other ways. They don't even apply this sort of dislike or suspicion or contempt to other Elizabethan figures. If they do, the person is usually not the focus of the study. Occasionally a scholar studies a villain, yes. But even then, the author generally ends up arguing for the good points of a villain or for his or her place in history, or for some mitigating circumstance, that redeems the study itself. People studying disasters in history may be highly critical of the rulers or the milieu at the time, yes. But in general scholars don't spend their lives in the company of historical figures whom they openly despise.

But there are New Testament scholars who detest and despise Jesus Christ. Of course, we all benefit from freedom in the academic community; we benefit from the enormous size of biblical studies today and the great range of contributions that are being made. I'm not arguing for censorship. But maybe I'm arguing for sensitivity—on the part of those who read these books. Maybe I'm arguing for a little wariness when it comes to the field in general. What looks like solid ground might not be solid ground at all.

Another point bothered me a great deal.

All these skeptics insisted that the Gospels were late documents, that the prophecies in them had been written after the Fall of Jerusalem. But the more I read about the Fall of Jerusalem, the more I couldn't understand this.

The Fall of Jerusalem was horrific, and involved an enormous and cataclysmic war, a war that went on and on for years in Palestine, followed by other revolts and persecutions, and punitive laws. As I read about this in the pages of S. G. F. Brandon, and in Josephus, I found myself amazed by the details of this appalling disaster in which the greatest Temple of the ancient world was forever destroyed.

I had never truly confronted these events before, never tried to comprehend them. And now I found it absolutely impossible that the Gospel writers could not have included the Fall of the Temple in their work had they written after it as critics insist.

It simply didn't and doesn't make sense.

These Gospel writers were in a Judeo-Christian cult. That's what Christianity was. And the core story of Judaism has to do with redemption from Egypt, and redemption from Babylon. And before redemption from Babylon there was a Fall of Jerusalem in which the Jews were taken to Baby-

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

lon. And here we have this horrible war. Would Christian writers not have written about it had they seen it? Would they not have seen in the Fall of Jerusalem some echo of the Babylonian conquest? Of course they would have. They were writing for Jews and Gentiles.

The way the skeptics put this issue aside, they simply assumed the Gospels were late documents because of these prophecies in the Gospels. This does not begin to convince.

Before I leave this question of the Jewish War and the Fall of the Temple, let me make this suggestion. When Jewish and Christian scholars begin to take this war seriously, when they begin to really study what happened during the terrible years of the siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the revolts that continued in Palestine right up through Bar Kokhba, when they focus upon the persecution of Christians in Palestine by Jews; upon the civil war in Rome in the 60s which Kenneth L. Gentry so well describes in his work *Before Jerusalem Fell*; as well as the persecution of Jews in the Diaspora during this period—in sum, when all of this dark era is brought into the light of examination—Bible studies will change.

Right now, scholars neglect or ignore the realities of this period. To some it seems a two-thousand-year-old embarrassment and I'm not sure I understand why.

But I am convinced that the key to understanding the Gospels is that they were written before all this ever happened. That's why they were preserved without question though they contradicted one another. They came from a time that was, for later Christians, catastrophically lost forever.

As I continued my quest, I discovered a scholarship quite different from that of the skeptics—that of John A. T. Robin-

son, in *The Priority of John*. In reading his descriptions, which took seriously the words of the Gospel itself, I saw what was happening to Jesus in the text of John.

It was a turning point. I was able to enter the Fourth Gospel, and see Jesus alive and moving. And what eventually emerged for me from the Gospels was their unique coherence, their personalities—the inevitable stamp of individual authorship.

Of course John A. T. Robinson made the case for an early date for the Gospels far better than I ever could. He made it brilliantly in 1975, and he took to task the liberal scholars for their assumptions then in *Redating the New Testament*, but what he said is as true now as it was when he wrote those words.

After Robinson I made many great discoveries, among them Richard Bauckham who in *The Gospels for All Christians* soundly refutes the idea that isolated communities produced the Gospels and shows what is obvious, that they were written to be circulated and read by all.

The work of Martin Hengel is brilliant in clearing away assumptions, and his achievements are enormous. I continue to study him.

The scholarship of Jacob Neusner cannot be praised enough. His translations of the Mishnah and the Tosefta are of inestimable value, and his essays are brilliant. He is a giant. Among the Jewish scholars Géza Vermes and David Flusser certainly ought to be read. David Flusser drew my attention to things in Luke's Gospel which I hadn't seen before.

General books I found important that cover the entire development of Jesus in the arts include a great survey book by Charlotte Allen called *The Human Christ*, which discusses how the early quest for the historical Jesus influenced the



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

motion-picture images of Jesus and Jesus in novels. The work of Luke Timothy Johnson has always been helpful, and so also the scholarship of Raymond E. Brown, and John E Meier. The work of Sean Freyne on Galilee is extremely important as is the work of Eric M. Meyers.

Let me mention Larry Hurtado's *Lord Jesus Christ*, and Craig L. Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, and the work of Craig S. Keener which I've only begun to read. I gready admire Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.

Roger Aus always teaches me something though I disagree with his conclusions completely. Mary S. Thompson's work is wonderful.

Highly recommended are the works of Robert Alter and Frank Kermode on the Bible as literature, and *Mimesis* by Erich Auerbach. In general, I must praise the work of Ellis Rivkin, Lee I. Levine, Martin Goodman, Claude Tresmon-tant, Jonathan Reed, Bruce J. Malina, Kenneth Bailey, D. Moody Smith, C. H. Dodd, D. A. Carson, Leon Morris, R. Alan Culpepper, and the great Joachim Jeremias. My special thanks to BibleGateway.com.

I learned something from every single book I examined.

The scholar who has given me perhaps some of my most important insights and who continues to do so through his enormous output is N. T. Wright. N. T. Wright is one of the most brilliant writers I've ever read, and his generosity in embracing the skeptics and commenting on their arguments is an inspiration. His faith is immense, and his knowledge vast.

In his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, he answers solidly the question that has haunted me all my life. Christianity achieved what it did, according to N. T. Wright, because Jesus rose from the dead.

It was the fact of the resurrection that sent the apostles

out into the world with the force necessary to create Christianity. Nothing else would have done it but that.

Wright does a great deal more to put the entire question into historical perspective. How can I do justice to him here? I can only recommend him without reservation, and go on studying him.

Of course my quest is not over. There are thousands of pages of the above-mentioned scholars to be read and reread.

There is so much of Josephus and Philo and Tacitus and Cicero and Julius Caesar that I have yet to cover. And there are so many texts on archaeology—I must go back to Freyne and Eric Meyers in Galilee, and things are being dug up in Palestine, and new books on the Gospels are being printed as I write.

But I see now a great coherence to the life of Christ and the beginning of Christianity that eluded me before, and I see also the subtle transformation of the ancient world because of its economic stagnation and the assault upon it of the values of monotheism, Jewish values melded with Christian values, for which it was not perhaps prepared.

There are also theologians who must be studied, more of Teilhard de Chardin, and Rahner, and St. Augustine.

Now somewhere during my journey through all of this, as I became disillusioned with the skeptics and with the flimsy evidence for their conclusions, I realized something about my book.

It was this. The challenge was to write about the Jesus of the Gospels, of course! Anybody could write about a liberal Jesus, a married Jesus, a gay Jesus, a Jesus who was a rebel. The "Quest for the Historical Jesus" had become a joke because of all the many definitions it had ascribed to Jesus.

The true challenge was to take the Jesus of the Gospels,

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

the Gospels which were becoming ever more coherent to me, the Gospels which appealed to me as elegant first-person witness, dictated to scribes no doubt, but definitely early, the Gospels produced before Jerusalem fell—to take the Jesus of the Gospels, and try to get inside him and imagine what he felt.

Then there were the legends—the Apocrypha—including the tantalizing tales in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas describing a boy Jesus who could strike a child dead, bring another to life, turn clay birds into living creatures, and perform other miracles. I'd stumbled on them very early in my research, in multiple editions, and never forgotten them. And neither had the world. They were fanciful, some of them humorous, extreme to be sure, but they had lived on into the Middle Ages, and beyond. I couldn't get these legends out of my mind.

Ultimately I chose to embrace this material, to enclose it within the canonical framework as best I could. I felt there was a deep truth in it, and I wanted to preserve that truth as it spoke to me. Of course that is an assumption. But I made it. And perhaps in assuming that Jesus did manifest supernatural powers at an early age I am somehow being true to the declaration of the Council of Chalcedon, that Jesus was God and Man at all times.

I am certainly trying to be true to Paul when he said that Our Lord emptied himself for us, in that my character has emptied himself of his Divine awareness in order to suffer as a human being.

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. I offer it to scholars in the hope that they will perhaps enjoy seeing the evidence of the research that's gone into it, and of course I offer it to those whom I so greedily admire who have been my teachers though I've never met them and probably never will.

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. I offer this novel with love to my readers who've followed me through one strange turn after another in the hope that Jesus will be as real to you as any other character I've ever launched into the world we share.

After all, is Christ Our Lord not the ultimate supernatural hero, the ultimate outsider, the ultimate immortal of them all?

If you've followed me this far, I thank you. I could append to this a bibliography of stifling length but I will not.

Let me in conclusion thank several people who have been my support and inspiration throughout these years:

Fr. Dennis Hayes, my spiritual director, who has answered my theological questions with patience always.

Fr. Joseph Callipare, whose sermons on the Gospel of John were brilliant and wonderful. My time spent in his parish in Florida was one of the most beautiful periods of my research and work.

Fr. Joseph Cocucci, whose letters and discussions on theology with me have been inspiring and truly great.

The Redemptorist Fathers, the priests of my parish in New Orleans, whose sermons have sustained me, and whose example has been a shining light. I leave them with regret. My father's education in the Redemptorist Seminary at Kirkwood, Missouri, no doubt changed the course of his life. My debt to the Redemptorists can never be paid.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Fr. Dean Robins and Fr. Curtis Thomas of the Nativity of Our Lord Parish, who have been welcoming to me as a new parishioner. I leave them with regret.

Br. Becket Ghioto, whose letters have been patient, wise, and full of wonderful insights and answers.

And last, but hardly least, Amy Troxler, my friend and companion, who has answered so many fundamental questions for me, and listened to my endless ravings, who has been with me to Mass, and brought me Communion when I couldn't go, who has been more of a help to me than I can ever say. It was Amy who was there for me on the afternoon in 1998 when I asked if she knew a priest who could hear my confession, who could help me go back to the Church. It was Amy who found the priest and took me to see him. It was Amy's example during those early months of attending the Mass in English that helped me *so* much to adjust to a liturgy that was wholly different from that which I'd left behind. I leave Amy as I leave New Orleans with the deepest regret.

My beloved staff, my dearest friends, my editor Vicky Wilson who read and commented on this manuscript much to its benefit, my family, I thank them all. I live in the environment of their nourishing love. I am blessed.

As for my son, this novel is dedicated to him. That says it all.

6 a.m., February 24, 2005