

The Infancy of Our Lord

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The Infancy of Our Lord

MS. Selden Supra 38 (s c 3426) 36v.

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A French verse version of the *De Infantia Salvatoris*, written in England c. A.D. 1300. For a transcription and comparison with Grenoble and Cambridge University Library copies see Gast — *Die Beiden Redaktionen*. The Cambridge MS. is later, without illustration, and is in a much shortened form.

The Infancy begins with the Annunciation and the story of Christ's birth in St. Matthew's Gospel. At the point where the Holy Family go into Egypt the Infancy turns to apocryphal stories to fill the details into the gaps of the Biblical account of Christ's Childhood. These apocryphal stories come mainly from the *Liber de Infantia* or *Pseudo-Matthew* written down in the eleventh century from stories two centuries earlier. The sources of the *Liber de Infantia* are the *Protoévangélium* and the Gospel of St. Thomas, but there are some untraced stories. These are supplemented by a few Greek and Syrian stories. For details and translated stories see M. R. James: "The Apocryphal New Testament". Throughout the Infancy the apocryphal details are fitted into the Gospel account to make a continuous story. Thus the return to Nazareth initiates a new group of stories about Jesus as a child of five or six. Attempts to give him schooling lead to the insertion of the Gospel story of Christ in the Temple teaching the Elders. The Infancy ends with the Marriage at Cana in Galilee, merging into the Gospel account of Christ's life and ministry. To those reading or listening to this verse Infancy of Christ and looking at its naïve pictures the

life of Christ would have been made more contemporary and more real. Hence the inclusion of such stories as Jesus being apprenticed to a dyer — and having to learn his alphabet from the clerks. Both words and pictures capture a vivid impression of a more than human little boy — malicious as well as saintly and proud of his powers over life and death. Mary becomes a tactful intermediary between Jesus and his harassed father Joseph who was always being told that his son was out of control. The Infancy begins and ends with the pious wish that the donor may be remembered before Christ and the last picture shows him kneeling holding an empty scroll.

KEY

measurements — approx. in brackets.

J. followed by a number — page references to M. R. James :
‘Apocryphal N.T.’ — e.g., J.73.

SOURCES :

St. Thomas' Gospel.

Vita Rythmica.

Lib. Infantia — stories original to this are untraced.

Frame 1 Fol. 1v The Nativity (4.6" x 2.1")

The Ox and the Ass worship the new-born Jesus. Taken from the story in St. Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 2, 9-12).

Frame 2 Fol. 2v The Kings before Herod (4.6" x 2.55")

Taken from the story in St. Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 2, 9-12).

Frame 3 Fol. 4v Flight into Egypt (4.6" x 2.55")

Animals come out of their dens to bow their heads and worship the Holy Family. This is a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy that creatures of the earth shall come together and a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11, 6-9).

J.75. Lib. Infantia

Frame 4 Fol. 5 Jesus and the Tree :—I

On the third day they rested. Mary sat under a tree and asked Joseph to pluck her its fruits to eat.

Frame 5 Fol. 5v Jesus and the Tree :—II

The tree is too high for Joseph to reach. Jesus speaks to it and at his command it bends low and offers its fruits to Mary.

Frame 6 Fol. 6 Jesus and the Tree :—III (4.6" x 2.3")

Jesus commands the tree to become straight again and to pour forth streams of pure water from its roots so that Joseph and Mary may drink.

J.75. Lib. Infantia

Frame 7 Fol. 8 The arrival in Egypt (large)

Jesus directs the Holy Family to Egypt. On their arrival they stay in a temple. The false gods fall down and devils flee out of the buildings. The rulers submit to Jesus.

J.75. Lib. Infantia

Frame 8 Fol. 9 Jesus and the Seven Pools

The family returns to Nazareth and Jesus reaches the age of 5. Oné Sabbath day he plays by a stream and makes seven pools of water. A Jewish boy comes and spoils them with a stick. Jesus curses him and he dies. The family complain, so Mary persuades Jesus to restore the boy's life.

J.76. St. Thomas' Gospel

Frame 9 Fol. 10 Jesus and the Sparrows (4.6" x 2.1")

Jesus returns to his games the same day and makes ten toy sparrows out of clay. Another Jew sees him and complains to Joseph that he is breaking the Sabbath. When they go to Jesus he

claps his hands and says "Fly away sparrows". They become alive and fly off.

J.76. St. Thomas' Gospel

Frame 10 Fol. 10v Jesus is attacked (4.6" x 2.1")

A Jew hits Jesus and dies as a result. Another Jew jumps on his back and tries to pull him down. The second boy also dies.

J.76. St. Thomas' Gospel

Frame 11 Fol. 13 Jesus and the Teachers (4.6" x 2.3")

The Jews are angry because of Jesus' powers and have him sent to two elders, Zacharias and Levi, to learn the Law. He disputes with them and confuses them.

J.77. St. Thomas' Gospel

Frame 12 Fol. 13v Jesus plays on two mounds (4.6" x 2.3")

Jesus goes out to play on two high mounds and the children follow him. He is the only one who can jump from one mound to the other. The rest fall and break their necks, only one remains alive. The Jews are angry but Jesus calls each child by name and brings them to life again.

Untraced

Frame 13 Fol. 14v Jesus and the Water Pots (4.6" x 1.8") I

Jesus goes to the well to fill his water pot. The other children try to break it but he mends it again.

Frame 14 Fol. 15 Jesus and the Water Pots (4.6" x 2.1") II

It is a hot day so Jesus hangs his water pot on a sunbeam and takes it home. The other children try to do likewise but theirs all fall to the ground and break. Jesus mends them.

J.70. Vita Rythmica

Frame 15 Fol. 16v Jesus rescues the Boy in the tower (4.6" x 2.55")

A boy named Joseph is a friend of Jesus. His father forbids him to go out to play and locks him in a tower. While the father is away Jesus comes and pulls out the boy by putting his finger in a chink in the wall.

J.68. Vita Rythmica

Frame 16 Fol. 20 Jesus revives Zeno (4.6" x 2.3") I

Jesus is at Nazareth watching the children playing in a building. One boy, Salomon, pushes another boy, Zeno, out. Zeno falls down the steps and is killed. The Jews come and blame Jesus.

Frame 17 Fol. 20v (4.6" x 2.3") II

Jesus brings Zeno back to life and the boy witnesses that Jesus is innocent. Zeno's parents worship Jesus.

J.77. St. Thomas' Gospel

Frame 18 Fol. 21v Jesus carries water in his tunic (4.6" x 1.7")

At Jericho Mary sends Jesus, who is now six years old, to fetch water. On his way a Jewish boy breaks his water pot so Jesus brings home the water in his tunic without losing a drop.

J.77. St. Thomas' Gospel

Frame 19 Fol. 21v Jesus and the Harvest (4.6" x 1.7")

Jesus finds a handful of grain. He sows it and within an hour it yields a whole field of corn.

J.77. St. Thomas' Gospel

Frame 20 Fol. 23 Jesus and the Oven (4.6" x 2.2")

In Jericho Jesus is playing with some children. They run away and are hid in a large oven. Jesus asks the people who hid them what live things are in the oven. They reply "pigs" and are astonished when the doors are opened because pigs, not children, come out.

*J.68. Syrian & Arabic story
(originally goats not pigs)*

Frame 21 Fol. 24 Jesus slides down a sunbeam (4.6" x 1.8")

In Jericho Jesus is playing and slides down a sunbeam. Other children try to do it and all are hurt. Jesus cures them.

J.70. Vita Rythmica

Frame 22 Fol.25v Jesus and the Dyer (4.6" x 2.1") I

When Jesus is seven years old he is apprenticed to a dyer to keep him out of mischief. He is taught his job and left to watch some cloth being dyed.

Frame 23 Fol. 26v (2.6" x 1.5") II

He has been ordered to put bales of cloth into vats of blue, green and scarlet and keep them separate but he puts them all into one vat of black dye and goes off to play.

Frame 24 Fol. 27 (2.7" x 1.7") III

The dyer comes back and is very angry, fearing his work wasted. Jesus draws out the wool and miraculously it is in different colours.

J.66. St. Thomas' Gospel

Frame 25 Fol. 27v Jesus and the Lions (4.6" x 1.7") I

Jesus, Mary and Joseph are travelling from Jerusalem to Jordan when Jesus finds a lioness and her cubs. Everyone else is frightened but he plays with them and they come to worship him.

Frame 26 Fol. 28 (4.6" x 1.7") II

People and soldiers from a nearby town come out warning Jesus that the lions are very fierce. Jesus orders the animals to stop attacking people and they obey.

J.78. Lib. Infantia

Frame 27 Fol. 28v Jesus straightens a beam of wood (4.6" x 1.8")

Joseph orders his carpenter's boy to make a pair of beams for a rich man. The boy is careless and makes one shorter than the other. It is crooked, so Jesus takes hold of it and straightens it, making it as long as the other.

J.77. St. Thomas' Gospel

(In some versions it is Jesus who makes the beam carelessly.)

Frame 28 Fol. 29 Jesus and the Teachers

Jesus is sent to one of the scribes to learn his alphabet but he argues with the teacher and confuses him. The teacher becomes angry, strikes Jesus and is immediately paralysed and dies.

J.77. St. Thomas' Gospel

(In this version of the story it is combined with a tale of a good teacher who was humble before Jesus and worshipped him as God.)

Frame 29 Fol. 31 Jesus heals a rich man of Capernaum

A rich man named Joseph dies at Capernaum. Jesus tells Joseph that if he goes to this namesake of his and speaks to him in the name of Jesus he will come to life again. Joseph does this and the man comes to life again and asks who Jesus is.

J.78. Lib. Infantia

**Frame 30 Fol. 32 Jesus heals his brother bitten by a viper
(4.6" x 1.4") I**

The brother of Jesus (James in some versions) is bitten by a viper while picking herbs. He shows his wound to Jesus.

Frame 31 Fol. 32v (4.6" x 1.7") II

Jesus saves his life by taking him back to the bushes where the viper is. He orders the viper to withdraw the poison. It dies and the brother is healed.

J.79. St. Thomas' Gospel

**Frame 32 Fol. 33 Jesus at Jerusalem teaching the Elders
(4.6" x 1.8")**

Taken from the Biblical story (Luke 2, 40-52).

Frame 33 Fol. 33v Jesus turns water into wine (4.6" x 2.0") I

A version of the marriage at Cana in Galilee (John 2, 1-11). Jesus and his disciples are there. The master of the feast is the traditional Archelechin.

Frame 34 Fol. 34 (4.6" x 1.5") II

(as above.)

Frame 35 Fol. 36v The donor (4.6" x 1.5")

The writing on this page is overwritten by a later English commentary and a 16th-century signature at the foot.

“ But you who have heard
These infancy tales of Jesus
Receive great comfort
From his virtuous deeds.”

“ Mais vous qui avez entendu
Ces enfances de Jesu
Grand solace avez recu
De ce qu'il fit par vertu.”