

Novelist trades vampire tales for early life of Christ

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SAN DIEGO, Calif. (RNS)-The queen of darkness has seen the light.

In her latest book, *Christ the Lord*, novelist Anne Rice turns away from the doomed souls of her best-selling tales about vampires and witches in favor of a first-person account of the 7-year-old Jesus.

"I was sitting in church talking to (God) about it, and I finally realized there was no holding back anymore," said Rice, 64, who returned to the Catholic Church in 1998 after a 30-year absence.

Novelist Anne Rice is leaving behind her vampire and witch tales for a new book, *Christ the Lord*, which imagines Jesus' childhood. (Photo courtesy of Sue Tebbe/RNS)

"I just said, 'From now on, it's all going to be for you.' And the book I felt I had to write was the life of Christ. ... When my faith was given back to me by God, redemption became a part of the world in which I lived. And I wasn't going to write any more books where that wasn't the case. You do not have to be transgressive in order to achieve great art."

With a distinct emphasis on the devout Jewishness of Jesus and his extended family, the novel-published Nov. 1 with a first print run of 500,000 copies-depicts their first year in Nazareth after leaving Egypt following the death of King Herod. The Gospel of Matthew reports Jesus, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt shortly after his birth to escape a death sentence by Herod.

Rice meticulously recounts the daily life of Jews in Galilee against the

backdrop of Roman occupation, detailing purification rites, Sabbath study, construction work in the nearby city of Sepphoris and trips to the Temple in Jerusalem for feasts and animal sacrifices.

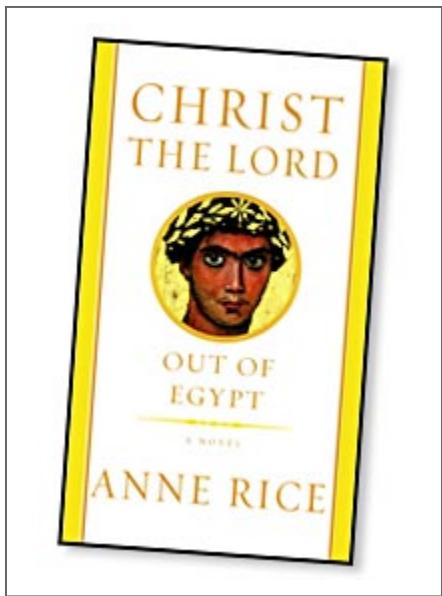
"The pious picture of the holy family in a little carpentry shop on a hill—that's not accurate," Rice said in her first interview about the book, speaking from her new home in California, where she moved five months before Hurricane Katrina devastated her hometown of New Orleans. "The challenge was to get some fictional verisimilitude there, to really present this as a vibrant society in which people are working and living together."

Rice devoted much of the two and a half years she spent on the novel delving into research, from ancient Jewish philosophers and historians like Philo and Josephus, to contemporary historical Jesus studies. At times, what she found disturbed her, as she explains in an author's note following the novel.

"Some of the people in New Testament scholarship don't hide their bias at all. They're just out to prove Jesus wasn't God, but, of course, that's impossible to prove," she said, taking issue as well with what she called "trends" and "fads," such as theories that Jesus was a political revolutionary or married.

Rice also critiques the widespread dating of the Gospels to between about 60 and 90 A.D., and the theory that they appeared decades apart.

Instead, she believes they were produced around the same time, and all before Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D.



Rice chooses 11 B.C. as the date of Jesus' birth. While she said she found one scholarly precedent for doing so, she uses the earlier date mainly to allow the 7-year-old Jesus to arrive from Egypt in time to witness the well-documented violence that erupted in Judea and Galilee after Herod's death in 4 B.C.

That seminal event in childhood is certain to influence Jesus in Rice's planned subsequent volumes. "At the birth of Jesus, the biggest story you would have heard—I can't prove it was ever mentioned, but I can't imagine it wasn't—was about the day the Romans came," said John Dominic Crossan, professor emeritus of religious studies at DePaul University and the author of *The Historical Jesus*. "I would have no problem with someone saying that the constitutive challenge for Jesus growing up in that period was 'OK, what about God, what about Rome, what about violence, what about resistance?'"

Beyond reconstructing the daily life of the times, Rice focuses on the young Jesus discovering—and grappling with—his divinity. Her questions are less about what would Jesus do, and more about how he would think.

Rice's Jesus is conflicted and confused, a dutiful son who comes to terms

with what he first only senses and then fully grasps—that he is the Son of God, yet fully human. “You can’t write a book, or at least I couldn’t, from the viewpoint of someone who knew he was God at every moment,” Rice said. “But I could write a book from the viewpoint of somebody who deliberately separated himself from that knowledge so he could experience things as a human being.”

The Gospels are almost silent on Jesus’ childhood, giving Rice a wide berth to take certain liberties with her story. In the book, Jesus is taught in Alexandria by the Hellenistic philosopher Philo, which in turns allows for her Jesus to be fluent in Greek, something many historians doubt was the case.

Rice also borrows two incidents—the slaying of a playmate and the turning of clay sparrows into live ones—from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, a second-century work that shows Jesus learning to use his divine powers for good. It never was accepted as part of the Christian Scriptures.

But again, biblical scholars question why Rice is devoting so much time to Jesus’ childhood, when the Gospel writers seemed to think it unimportant.

“If you want to talk about the infancy of Jesus, it’s perfectly valid, but please don’t say you’re doing it according to the spirit of the Gospels,” said Crossan. “Only two of the Gospels even bother to talk about Jesus’ birth, and only Luke bothered to mention the infant at age 12. The other (Gospels) figure that’s not important. Let’s get to what really counts, the public life.”

Rice said her greatest hope for people reading Christ the Lord is that they will at least begin to think about Jesus, if not come to believe in him. Due in part to her dismay at the damage done in Christian relations with the Jewish community in the wake of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ, she plans to send copies of her novel to Jewish leaders.

"Of course, they're not going to turn around and give a quote to a book called Christ the Lord, but I want them to know that I understand Jesus is a Jew and all his family were, and all his apostles and all the first Christians were. ... I hope it will generate good will," she said.

Rice's ultimate goal, she said, is for readers "to think, 'Wow, maybe he did exist.' That was the challenge, to make it real. The greatest compliment people pay me when they read this book is when they say, 'I was there.'"

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