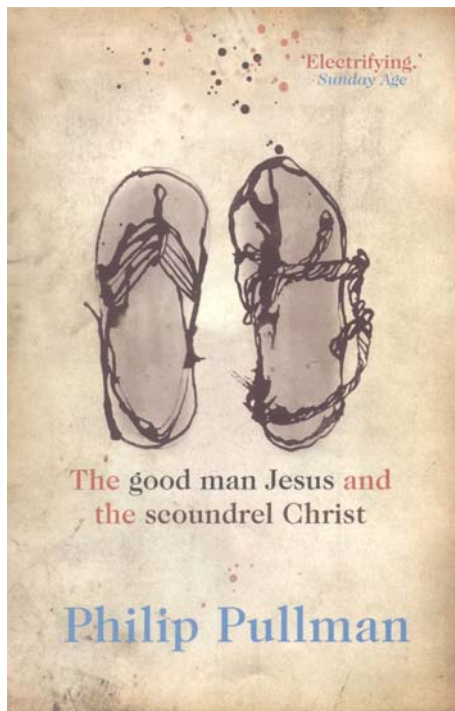


The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ



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Philip Pullman

[Text](#) 2011

ISBN: 9781921758096

\$23.95

245 pp

“Each of us can interpret a story in a different way, depending on our own unique life experiences. We may disagree with a story, agree with it, or learn something new from it. An author usually has a purpose for the story, and there are always some sort of underlying values behind the text he writes.”¹

This is not a quote from the book, but another writer’s comment on the relationship between author and reader. It is particularly pertinent to Philip Pullman’s relationship with his readers, because the story he retells here inevitable brings with it a large collection of historical, personal, religious, ethnic and spiritual baggage. As a reader I bring this baggage with me, as will every reader, be s/he a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, an agnostic or, like the author, an atheist,

or a confusion of these. Because the story of Jesus Christ so inexorably permeates our culture in Australia, Europe, the Americas and other parts of the world, it is impossible for any person from those cultures to not have an attitude to that story. Herein lies a difficulty for the author. While in relation to any story there may be a debate, even argument, over whether it is a good story or not and what it means or is meant to mean and whether it succeeds in touching the reader in some meaningful way, the story in this book is well known by almost every reader. Or is it?

For two thousand years there have been debates and arguments about the historical Jesus of Nazareth and his role in his time and the meaning of his life to people ever since; even whether there is any meaning in his life. This is precisely what Philip Pullman tackles in this book. He does so in an innovative and refreshing way. I should warn fundamentalist Christians that Philip Pullman’s retelling of the ancient story may well cause you grief and upset. It is not the story as it appears in the Bible, though even there the story is not a single account but the interpretation by a number of people of accounts by others of what they heard happened often before they were themselves born. And there are accounts of the life of Jesus Christ which were excluded by various councils of bishops, or simply not included by reason of irrelevance, inaccuracy or that they were written too late or not known about at the time. Philip Pullman uses material from some of these extra-Biblical accounts, such as the story of the child Jesus creating twelve sparrows out of mud and bringing them to life.²

I am not a Christian, but the story of Jesus Christ has always fascinated me for its power over people and its ability to take an historical figure and have him be more than that figure. Jesus is not unique in this – there have been many people who are (or were) revered as prophets, some of who, like Jesus, became the catalyst for a new religion or religious sect. There have always been people who were able to inspire others to lead ‘better’ lives, but few have had the impact of Jesus Christ.

I was not sure what to expect from this book – I make a point, if I am to review a book, not to read other reviews or any publisher’s blurbs. If I expected anything, it was perhaps a treatise on the duality of the one person being both physical human and an embodiment of God. I also expected the historical context of the Roman occupation and the fact that Jesus was a Jew living in a Jewish community. What I found, from the first sentence of the book, was a surprise. A refreshing surprise, as I had never contemplated Philip Pullman’s take on the story and it forced me to contemplate the possibility of what he was putting before me.

In case you decide to not read any other reviews or publisher's blurbs, I will resist quoting that first give-away sentence. Rarely have I read a book where the first, short sentence has me immediately riveted. It is also a sentence that may have some people hurl the book across the room in righteous anger because it amounts to heresy. Everything in the book follows from the first ten words.

The author's own words are illuminating:

“The story I tell comes out of the tension within the dual nature of Jesus Christ, but what I do with it is my responsibility alone. Parts of it read like a novel, parts like a history, and parts like a fairy tale; I wanted it to be like that because it is, among other things, a story about how stories become stories.”

Stories inform our lives, giving us guidance and inspiration. It is often not important whether the story is historically accurate or apocryphal or a pure fantasy. Or is it important? We seem to want what we are told to be the truth or, at least, for the story to be told in such a way that we can more easily choose to believe it to be the truth. *The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ* plays with this conundrum, both in the very retelling of the Jesus Christ story and the way Philip Pullman tells it. He challenges us on many levels; his retelling can affect us mentally, emotionally and viscerally.

I value writing that opens up new ways of thinking, especially when it deals with a subject about which there is so much cultural baggage and Church dogma. I have read other books³ which present new ways of thinking about the life and influence of Jesus, most of them academic treatises. The power in Philip Pullman's book is the beauty and simplicity of the language he uses and his mastery of the art of storytelling. For all these reasons, this book was for me a delight from start to finish.

1. Debbie Espey, 28/9/2009, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/2213345/personal_experience_varies_the_way.html
2. from *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*
3. see for instance *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes* by John Shelby Spong, Harper, 1996