

The Cherry-Tree Carol: Knowledge is a Gift, Not an Acquisition

By Charles Upton

The “Cherry-Tree Carol” is one of the Child Ballads, number 54 to be exact. It is said to be based on an account of Jesus’ infancy that appears in Chapter XX of *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, which was probably written between 600 and 625 A.D., and which bears some resemblance to a similar story told of the Virgin Mary and a date-palm, not a cherry-tree, in *Mary*, the 19th *surah* of the Qur’an, verses 23ff. Since this *surah* is believed to have been received by the Prophet Muhammad shortly before June in the year 622, the date of his *Hijra* from Mecca to Yathrib, it could conceivably have been the source for the story of Mary and the cherry-tree in *Pseudo-Matthew*—though some of course will say that the story must have passed in the opposite direction. A version of this carol—really more of a ballad—was sung by Jean Ritchie, but my favorite is still the one by Joan Baez, which is simple, compact, highly poetic, and sufficient to my theme. It goes like this:

When Joseph was an old man
An old man was he,
He married Virgin Mary
The Queen of Galilee.

Joseph and Mary
Walked through an orchard green;
There were berries and cherries
As thick as might be seen.

And Mary spoke to Joseph
So meek and so mild:
“Gather me some cherries,
For I am with child.”

And Joseph flew in anger
In anger flew he,
“Let the Father of the Baby
Gather cherries for thee!”

Then up spoke Baby Jesus
From within Mary’s womb:
“Bend down the tallest tree
That my mother might have some.”

And bent down the tallest branch
Till it touched Mary’s hand
Cried she, “O look thou Joseph,
I have cherries by command.”

The literal meaning and sentiment of this carol conceals an inner significance which is the exact reverse of what appears on the surface. Among Christian saints, Joseph has the dubious distinction of having (so to speak) been “cuckolded by God”, chosen to raise a child not his own, the child of a bride much younger than he and one who necessarily appeared, to faithless and worldly eyes, as guilty of adultery. (Certain commentaries to the Jewish *Talmud* shamelessly exploit this slander to the fullest possible extent.) The Gospels themselves tell us that Joseph was deeply disturbed by his wife’s pregnancy, till an angel of God appeared and revealed to him that Mary’s condition was the result of her being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. Thus the shame of Joseph in the eyes of the world concealed, and also protected, a pre-eminence that places him second to Mary alone in the annals of Christian sanctity.

The anger expressed by Joseph in “The Cherry-Tree Carol” is obviously anger at the apparent revelation of his wife’s adultery; this, however, is not the only perspective from which the matter can be viewed. Joseph refuses to gather cherries to satisfy his pregnant wife’s food cravings; instead, he bitterly and ironically challenges the father of the baby to perform that task—a challenge immediately responded to by the unborn child himself. If, as Jesus said in the Gospel of John, “I and the Father are One”; if He in fact represents God’s Self-conception within the womb of the purest of the human race, herself conceived without sin; then the Father of the Baby did indeed gather cherries for the Virgin, who was in effect both His wife and His mother. But what does it mean that Joseph would not, or could not, gather this fruit for Mary himself, that only the

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