A Latin Infancy Gospel: The Birth of Jesus*

(Christian Apocrypha)

This is a medieval document that exists in two manuscripts. Most of this Gospel is based upon Pseudo-Matthew and the Gospel of James. However, there are passages that are unique to this gospel, which appear to use a source that is probably from the Church's early years, and which have a birth narrative unknown elsewhere. M. R. James, who first published the Arundel and Hereford manuscripts of the gospel, claims that the birth narrative may be from the second century. We have selected passages from the Arundel manuscript—it is more primitive than the Hereford version—which rely upon the unknown source.

*Introduction by David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan.
Behold a girl came with a chair which was customarily used to help women giving birth. She stopped. When they saw her they were amazed, and Joseph said to her, "Child, where are you going with that chair?" The girl responded, "My mistress sent me to this place because a youth came to her with great haste and said, 'Come quickly to help with an unusual birth; a girl will give birth for the first time.' When she heard this, my mistress sent me on before her; look, she herself is following."

Joseph looked back and saw her coming; he went to meet her and they greeted each other. The midwife said to Joseph, "Sir, where are you going?" He replied, "I seek a Hebrew midwife." The woman said to him, "Are you from Israel?" Joseph said, "I am from Israel." The woman said to him, "Who is the young woman who will give birth in this cave?" Joseph replied, "Mary, who was promised to me, who was raised in the Lord's Temple." The midwife said to him, "She is not your wife?" And Joseph said, "She was promised to me, but was made pregnant by the Holy Spirit." The midwife said to him, "What you say, is it true?" Joseph said to her, "Come and see."

They entered the cave. Joseph said to the midwife, "Come, see Mary." When she wished to enter to the interior of the cave, she was afraid, because a great light shone resplendent in the cave, the light did not wane in the day nor through the night as long as Mary stayed there . . . .

Joseph said, "Mary. Behold, I have brought to you a midwife, Zachel, who stands outside in front of the cave, who because of the brightness not only dares not enter the cave, but even cannot." When she heard this, Mary smiled. Joseph said to her, "Do not smile, but take care; she comes to examine you in case you need medicine." He ordered the midwife to enter to Mary and she stood before her. For hours Mary permitted herself to be watched, then the midwife cried with a loud voice and said, "Lord, great God, have mercy, because never has this been heard, nor seen, nor even dreamed of, until now, that the breasts should be full of milk and a male child, after birth, should make his mother known to be a virgin. There was no offering of blood in the birth, no pain occurred in the parturition. A virgin conceived, a virgin has given birth and after she gave birth, she remained a virgin."

[The midwife is asked to relate what she had seen to Symeon, Joseph's son. See Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3. The following is, therefore, a flashback.]

"When I entered to the maiden, I found her face looking upward; she was inclined toward Heaven and speaking to herself. I truly believe that she prayed to and blessed the Most High. When I had come to her, I said to her, 'Daughter, tell me, do you not feel some pain, or is not some part of your body gripped with pain?' She, however, as if she heard nothing, remained immobile like solid rock, intent on Heaven.

"In that hour, everything ceased. There was total silence and fear. For even the winds stopped, they made no breeze; there was no motion of tree leaves; no sound of water was heard. The streams did not flow; there was no motion of the sea. All things produced in the water were quiet; there was no human voice sounding; there was a great silence. For the pole itself ceased its rapid course from that hour. Time almost stopped its measure. All, overwhelmed with great fear, kept silent; we were ex-
pecting the advent of the most high God, the end of the world.

"As the time drew near, the power of God showed itself openly. The maiden stood looking intently into Heaven; she became as a grapevine [or, she became snow-white]. For now the end of good things was at hand. When the light had come forth, Mary worshiped him to whom she saw she had given birth. The child himself, like the sun, shone bright, beautiful, and was most delightful to see, because he alone appeared as peace, soothing the whole world. In that hour, when he was born, the voice of many invisible beings in one voice proclaimed "Amen." And the light, when it was born, multiplied, and it obscured the light of the sun itself by its shining rays. The cave was filled by the bright light together with a most sweet odor. The light was born just as the dew descends from Heaven to the earth. For its odor is fragrant beyond all the sweet smell of ointments.

"I, however, stood stupefied and amazed. Awe grasped me. I was gazing intently at the fantastically bright light which had been born. The light, however, after a while, shrank, imitated the shape of an infant, then immediately became outwardly an infant in the usual manner of born infants. I became bold and leaned over and touched him. I lifted him in my hands with great awe, and I was terrified because he had no weight like other babies who are born. I looked at him closely; there was no blemish on him, but he was in his body totally shining, just as the dew of the most high God. He was light to carry, splendid to see. For a while I was amazed at him because he did not cry as newborn children are supposed to. While I held him, looking into his face, he laughed at me with a most joyful laugh, and, opening his eyes, he looked intently at me. Suddenly a great light came forth from his eyes like a great flash of lightning."