

# The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ

By Philip Pullman (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2010)

A review by Phil Green, Evangelical Alliance Public Theology Research Assistant

---

Emblazoned across the back cover of Philip Pullman's new book, *The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ* are the words, "This is a story". It's important that the reader keeps this in mind as they delve into this latest version of Jesus' life.

The premise of this novel is a common one: Jesus was a good man, a wise teacher who helped lift the spirits of the poor and oppressed. He never wanted any more than this. However, others took the stories and used them to create an earth-changing and people-controlling movement. Some parts were tweaked, others aspects were exaggerated, while several components (including Jesus' divinity and resurrection) were completely fabricated. To this end, Pullman has not produced anything new. However, the way he has done it is altogether fresh, unique and engaging.

Mary gave birth to twins, one she named Jesus, the other Christ. Jesus was the stronger and healthier twin, who after a mischievous childhood became a carpenter before commencing his work as an itinerant preacher and healer. He constantly sought to downplay his importance, but as more and more people began referring to him as 'King Jesus' his execution became inevitable.

Meanwhile the other twin, Christ, manipulated events and misreported stories in order to found the church and provide it with the momentum it needed to gain global influence. It was Christ who tempted Jesus in the wilderness, not Satan, as he persuaded Jesus to use his charisma to unite the world in a 'Kingdom of the faithful'. When Peter suggested that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus was quick to silence him. However, Christ, not wanting the truth to spoil a good story, added the bit about Peter's role in building the church. It was Christ, not Judas who betrayed Jesus, and after the crucifixion it was Christ who pretended to be Jesus to convince people that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Pullman explains that "Above all, this book is about how stories become stories." This novel suggests that the foundation for the church is a fabricated story. It is no secret that Pullman does not like the church and organised religion. It was a central thread in *His Dark Materials* and it is also a key idea in this novel as he seeks to separate the 'good man Jesus' with the creation of what he considers to be a bad, controlling and manipulative church.

Although we might disagree with much of what is contained within these pages we should allow ourselves to be challenged. Have we distorted the

message of Jesus? Have we tweaked it so it fits our lives better? Has the church become more associated with bad news rather than the good news Jesus was known for? We might get frustrated at Pullman's attitude about the church; but perhaps his experience of the church has been a negative one. We should take the opportunity to revisit the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as we seek to discover the authentic Jesus. Then we should ensure that the church is reflecting Jesus, so that as many people as possible have a positive experience of church.

As Christians we need to approach this book as we should any other book, prayerfully and critically, with our eyes wide open. The back cover might claim "This is a story", however, a story is never *just* a story. Even a bad story takes us on a journey, engage us, stir emotions within us and get us thinking. Therefore we need to be alert. However, there's a saying, "No publicity is bad publicity?" If we follow this line of thought we should thank Pullman for writing this book as it will get people thinking and talking about Jesus, providing us with opportunities to discuss what we believe. Conversely, a book like this can be a cause for concern as it can sow and water seeds of doubt in both the searchers and fragile Christ-followers.

Christianity is built on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This book is yet another wake-up call that we need to know, and be talking about, the authentic Jesus revealed in the Bible. To do this confidently we need to remind ourselves why we believe that the Canonical Gospels are the credible ones and provide us with the benchmark to which we should compare everything else said about Jesus, who is the Christ.

---

## Recommended Books:

*Why trust the Bible?* Amy Orr-Ewing (IVP, 2008)

*The Case for Christ.* Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 1998)

*The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?* F.F. Bruce (Eerdmans, 2003)

*Who was Jesus?* (New edition) N.T. Wright (SPCK, 2005)