

**“Have you read my ‘Christ’ story?”:
Mary Austin’s *The Man Jesus* and
London’s *The Star Rover***

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On October 26, 1915, Mary Austin, the author of *The Land of Little Rain* and a host of other books, had started to worry that her work was disappearing from print almost as soon as it had been published, and that readers had failed to understand her latest book. For consolation, she wrote to an old friend whom she had known since their days in the artists’ colony at Carmel. She told him she was tired of being called “the greatest American stylist,” even if it was a compliment that H.G. Wells placed her “on a lonely pedestal alongside Stephen Crane.” What’s more, critics and the reading public readers had misunderstood the message of her most recent book, *The Man Jesus: Being a Brief Account of the Life and Teaching of the Man of Nazareth*: “Nobody seems to have discovered that I have said that Christian banking should be administered on behalf of those who serve rather than those who own. I thought that was a fairly suggestive conclusion—that a man could borrow money on his capacity to serve society rather than on his wife’s diamonds” (*Letters III*: 1514).

If Austin was looking for soft commiseration, she wrote to the wrong person, for Jack London, her correspondent, took a different approach to the question of audiences. “The majority of the people who inhabit the planet Earth are bone-heads,” he wrote in response. “I have read and enjoyed every bit of your “Jesus Christ” book as published serially in the *North American Review*. What if it does not get across? I have again and again written books that failed to get across” (*Letters III*: 1513). He told her that *The Sea-Wolf* was an attack on, not praise for, the Nietzschean super-man; that *Martin Eden* was another attack on the super-man that no one understood; and that he has had to be content “to be admired for my red-blood brutality and for a number of nice little things like that which are not true of my work at all.” But the question of being misunderstood had clearly

touched a nerve for London. “Heavens, have you read my ‘Christ’ story?” he continues. “Said book has been praised for its red-bloodedness and no mention has been made of my handling of the Christ situation in Jerusalem at all.”

With few exceptions, modern critics, like London’s contemporaries, have focused on the sensational Darrell Standing prison-torture plot. Susan Gatti reads the novel’s ironic humor as a means of fostering community among the prisoners, and Christopher Gair, in a Foucauldian analysis, sees a subversion of the systematic management popularized by Frederick Winslow Taylor. More recently, Jason Haslam also uses Foucault to argue that London uses the prison as a “synecdoche for the ideological deadening of each citizen . . . to State-sponsored hegemony” (243). London was interested in the prison angle, but despite his protestations, was bothered by the critics’ failure to understand his Christ story. That Austin, a mystic who believed she was in touch with Indian spirits, and London, an avowed materialist, should have written Christ stories at all seems unusual, but that both should express such concern over the reception of their stories deserves further investigation. To consider *The Star Rover* in the context of Austin’s *The Man Jesus* raises several questions. First, how did London and Austin fashion their Christ stories to fit a popular audience? Second, how were their versions of the Christ story fashioned, if at all, to reflect progressive social politics? Third, what did London see in Austin’s “Christ story” that made him turn to it first in the *North American Review*?

London’s “Christ story” is the penultimate episode of his 1915 novel *The Star Rover*. Based in part on the experiences of real-life prisoners Ed Morrell and Jacob Oppenheimer, *The Star Rover* is the story of Darrell Standing, a former professor serving a life term in Folsom Prison for murdering a colleague. Standing irritates the prison guards when he criticizes “the motion-wastage of the loom rooms” (9) and is beaten for his trouble; after being branded an incorrigible, he tells off Warden Atherton and is placed in solitary confinement. When an informer implicates Standing in a plot to blow up the prison, the authorities refuse to believe that he does not know where the package with thirty-five pounds of dynamite is hidden. Since the dynamite does not exist, Standing can tell them nothing, so they truss him up in a straitjacket for days to force him to reveal where it is hidden. In the extreme double confinement of jacket and cell, Standing discovers a perverse form of freedom when Morrell teaches him the trick of willing a physical near-death in order to free his consciousness to roam through time and

space. He travels through past lives and past identities, including those of Count Guillaume Sainte-Maure, who dies in a fencing match; an Egyptian hermit; Jesse Fancher, a nine-year-old boy who dies in the Mountain Meadows Massacre in 1857; Adam Stang, a seventeenth-century sailor who marries into the royal family of Korea but ends up a beggar; Ragnar Lodbrog, a Norseman turned Roman citizen and legionnaire, who narrates the “Christ story”; and Daniel Foss, a nineteenth-century sailor shipwrecked for eight years on a rocky island.

Each period of punishment in the straitjacket brings with it another adventure for Standing in time-and-space travel to past lives, so he taunts the warden by encouraging longer, harsher levels of punishment for himself. Plotting revenge on the man who had fabricated the story of the dynamite, Standing escapes into the prison yard, too weak for anything but a symbolic gesture of defiance. In his extremity, he strikes a guard and is sentenced to death, but he does not fear it. Given his experiences in star-roving, Standing is calm and unafraid because he has concluded that “Life is spirit and spirit cannot die.” In writing about the effect of this passage, the reviewer for *The Living Age* commented in 1915, “Jack London has for so long been known as an apostle of physical strength . . . that his message . . . that the spirit is the only real thing and cannot die, has peculiar weight” (*Living Age* 25 December 1915: 821).

Reviewers treated the “Christ story” as a tale of its Norse hero, Ragnar Lodbrog, and it is consistent with the pattern of others in the novel. The episodes in *The Star Rover* alternate between those of a character confronting a life-threatening situation, like Jesse Fancher or Daniel Foss, and those faced with more complex options than survival, such as the choice between love and duty. At least two, Lodbrog’s and Strang’s, are structured as captivity narratives, in which Standing’s alter ego must confront an alien, sometimes savage, culture and negotiate his place within it without destroying his physical integrity and sense of national identity. In a nod to psychological verisimilitude, all of Standing’s alter egos bear traits that he exhibits in the main narrative, including a sense of superiority to their surroundings and, in the case of Adam Strang, the ability to be patient in the service of revenge. But the “Christ novel” plot differed from the others, too. As Jeanne Campbell Reesman has written, this was the novel that London “labored intermittently for most of his writing career” (Reesman 74). In his extensive investigation of the

Austin rose to fame in the same year as London, 1903, when her book *The Land of Little Rain* established her as a popular writer. Like London in his Northland stories, she chose the borderlands of an inhospitable nature and its Native American inhabitants as her subject matter, using a naturalist’s eye to describe the vegetation and topography of the Southwestern desert that she, like London with the Yukon, knew intimately from personal experience.

origin, sources, and significance of *The Star Rover*, James Williams argues that London’s work on the “Christ novel” coincided with periods of his intense interest in socialism, and that London worked on the “Christ novel” during three distinct periods of his life between 1899 and 1901, during which his conception of the Nordic hero took shape; in 1906 and 1907, when his reading of Ernst Haeckel encouraged him to see “the socialistic nature of Jesus’s message” (27); and 1911 through 1913, when his rereading of Renan’s *Life of Christ* and *Antichrist* gave him more detailed material.

Had he chosen to use them, London had other models available as well for his “Christ story.” In the early nineteenth century, novels such as William Ware’s *Julian: or, Scenes in Judea* (1841) and Joseph Holt Ingraham’s *The Prince of the House of David* (1855) had hewed close to the Biblical narrative in their retellings, as London apparently planned to do originally. By the time he wrote *The Star Rover*, however, London instead chose the method used by authors later in the nineteenth century, having a main character moved to belief through incidental encounters with Jesus. This method had been highly successful in General Lew Wallace’s immense bestseller *Ben-Hur* (1880) and Marie Corelli’s *Barabbas* (1893), the latter an acknowledged source for London.¹ Given the popularity of such novels, London could rest assured that the combination of adventure and religious representation would have posed no problems for censorious reviewers. As Paul Gutjahr notes in his analysis of *Ben Hur*’s reception, the popularity of Wallace’s novel derived from a combination of historical accuracy and melodramatic romance, a combination that confirmed readers’ “biblically based conceptions of reality” while it satisfied their need for emotional release (Gutjahr 63).

London’s incorporation of the Christ story within a “red-blooded” adventure tale drew on the same formulas that Wallace and others had used successfully, but in keeping with his interests in northern “races,” his hero, Ragnar

Lodbrog, is a Norseman (a Dane). Born on shipboard in a howling gale and dunked into a tub of mead, Lodbrog grows to adulthood, becomes a “sweep-slave” in the Roman galleys, and ascends to the position of “freeman, citizen, and soldier” in command of a company of Pilate’s troops. Significantly, London chooses not to tell his captivity story, instead having Lodbrog declare that it is “too long” (231). The elision of this narrative is a telling choice for London because the hero’s triumphant ascension from low beginnings to a high position through his strength and intelligence is a staple plot in London’s fiction. As in other London works, such as “Samuel,” the story that London chooses not to tell should therefore alert the reader about the importance of the story that he does choose to tell.

One reason that London does not tell the captivity story is that he wants the reader to attend to something quite different: philosophy, not action, is the key to Lodbrog’s story. The bulk of the text consists of a series of philosophical conversations between Lodbrog; the Jewish woman Miriam (based on Anna Strunsky), with whom he falls instantly in love; and Pontius Pilate, whose tragedy is that he understands intellectually the political and religious forces that cause him to act but is unable to stop himself from catering to the priests. At first, the conversations between Lodbrog and Miriam are like flirtatious courtship debates. For example, Lodbrog describes his mead-hall vision of Valhalla with Miriam, who holds out for a mystical, spiritual heaven. Their debates turn more serious, however, as they discuss the application of general principles to particular instances: abstract concepts of the law as applied to individual cases of transgression; the jurisdiction of civil versus religious authority; and the perennial conflict between love and duty. Norseman and Roman, captive and citizen, captain and soldier, Lodbrog exists between identities, and by virtue of his position between worlds, he brings what he considers the bracing cold light of Northern rationality to his judgments of the people of warmer countries, such as the Romans and the Jews. He considers himself a Roman and expresses pleasure that only auxiliary troops, not Romans, participate in the persecution of Jesus, yet he also realizes that allegiance to Roman law forces Pilate, who “thought and acted in governmental abstractions” (London 241), to turn Christ over to be crucified.

London creates Lodbrog as a man of action, yet paradoxically places Lodbrog in a story in which his role is not to act but to be acted upon. As Pilate is about to

pass judgment, a “mangy, bearded, long-haired fanatic” leaps forward to affirm that “Tiberius is emperor; there is no king” (254). Outraged by the insult to Jesus, Lodbrog grinds his foot into the man’s and sees Pilate’s similar fury. Both are stopped from retaliation by the power—which London, following Renan, calls the “charm”—of Jesus, who wordlessly makes them understand that what follows is inevitable. Later, when the now-converted Miriam begs Lodbrog to rescue Jesus from crucifixion, Lodbrog again refuses to act. Miriam taunts him with being a “slave of Tiberius,” but his refusal is conditioned not by duty to Tiberius but by the recognition of inevitable fate that he had seen in Jesus’s eyes. Two features are especially noteworthy here. The first is that the effect that Jesus has on the eminently rational Lodbrog has nothing to do with Lodbrog’s faith, for he is not a believer when he first sees Jesus; rather, the effect arises from a powerful charisma that leaves Lodbrog free to act but desirous of doing Jesus’s bidding. The second feature, one that London’s initial readers seem to have missed, is that London creates an action hero not in order to show “red-blooded brutality” but to present as heroic a character who restrains himself. Others in *The Star Rover* practice patience only in the service of ultimate revenge, but Lodbrog restrains himself as an act of resistance to revenge. He is the inverse of his modern avatar Darrell Standing, for his restraint comes entirely from interior spiritual forces rather than exterior material ones.

Austin’s *The Man Jesus* reaches similar conclusions, but its form differs greatly from London’s book. Austin rose to fame in the same year as London, 1903, when her book *The Land of Little Rain* established her as a popular writer. Like London in his Northland stories, she chose the borderlands of an inhospitable nature and its Native American inhabitants as her subject matter, using a naturalist’s eye to describe the vegetation and topography of the Southwestern desert that she, like London with the Yukon, knew intimately from personal experience. Yet Austin was a self-professed natural mystic whose experiences paralleled those of London’s Darrell Standing, without the need for either a strait-jacket or knuckle-rapping star-rover lessons transmitted from another inmate to instruct her. According to her biographers Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, Austin believed that she could “adopt the character of another person, an Indian woman, for instance,” and Austin herself describes “sending my subconscious self at night to try and find the facts I wanted” (Goodman and Dawson 41). Influenced by a Paiute healer named Tinnemaha and also by her reading of William James, whom she visited

when he came to San Francisco, Austin described herself as a religious “pragmatist” who “demanded that something more should come out of mystical experience than the mere ecstatic notice of its taking place” (Goodman and Dawson 40). The result is that, like Darrell Standing, who believes that “spirit cannot die” (329), Austin believed that the world “evaded the best of logic; it had to exist on faith” (40).

Austin’s *The Man Jesus* is far from a mystical document, however; its rational tone and careful evaluation of the facts suggests instead Jack London at his most logical. Published in the *North American Review* from June through November 1915 and thereafter in book form, *The Man Jesus* generated letters from readers praising her account for being “refreshingly independent of convention” (“Praise of ‘The Man Jesus’” 791) and deriding it as “blasphemous” because it neglected to emphasize that Jesus was “God himself” (“Mrs. Austin’s Psychogeny of Christ” 954). It is, in fact, not far from the sort of “great man” biography so common in the Progressive Era, a form best exemplified by the work of Rose Wilder Lane in fictionalized as-told-to works such as *Henry Ford’s Own Story*, *Charlie Chaplin’s Own Story*, and, most infamously after London’s death, *Life and Jack London*, which infuriated Charmian London and Eliza London by its inaccuracies. *The Man Jesus* is Austin’s attempt to render a Christ in human terms, one whose extraordinariness relies less on his recognition of his own divinity than on his coming to terms with the divinity that exists within him as in every man. Accordingly, she presents extended descriptions of the regions and terrain that he inhabited to explain his character traits, since Austin believed regions shaped the character of communities and the people within them.

In her historical retelling of the Gospels, Austin peppers her text with qualifications and objections to the details of the Biblical account. She consistently downplays the miraculous and sensa-

What may have interested London most is the political edge that Austin gives to Christ’s life. Austin downplays the usual interpretations of stories that might suggest a division of wealth or socialist ideals; she dismisses that the Sermon on the Mount preaches a “proletariat heaven” and carefully explains that Jesus proscribed the attachment to possessions, not the possessions themselves, in his parable of the camel and the needle’s eye.

tional, even preferring to call Jesus “Joshua” or “the carpenter” to deemphasize his divinity, and she repeatedly resorts to phrases like “according to the historical record.” For example, she challenges the historicity of the place of Jesus’s birth, saying “there is a tradition that he was born in Bethlehem” but that this could not be considered fact because he “never referred to the place and never visited it” (942). Similarly, all that is “historically admissible” (480) in the last supper is the ritual meal itself, during which Jesus suggested only that the apostles think of him at Passover, not that they institute a sacrament of communion. In examining the idea that Christ rose after three days in the tomb, she subtly challenges the idea that Jesus died during the crucifixion, noting that he was “a man of great hardihood” and that his body “was not broken” except

for the nail holes in hands and feet “and possibly a spear prick in the side” (633), which is, she states, only a later story and not an eyewitness account. “All the God-tales come straight out of the heart of man,” Austin editorializes, adding that “there is a part of us which lies remote from the region of material sense” (944). The story of Jesus in this book is the story of his becoming aware of his powers as a mystic, which are gained through growth and development much as every other person’s are without the perfect foreknowledge that characterizes divinity. Indeed, her Jesus is a somewhat ordinary but progressive thinker. She specifies, for example, that he does not invent the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” but he does preach “acceptance of all women in the Father” despite Paul’s later “prejudice” against them (470).

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rupt elite had been disrupted by Jesus's action of scattering the moneylenders, she sees a "thoroughly modern situation" in his arrest: "a representative body, in the main, well-intentioned, manipulated by a group within the group whose spring of action was illegitimate profit" (628), as if they were union members being led astray by political bosses. This episode, which stands out in the narrative precisely because of its use of modern terms, constitutes the message Austin mentioned in her letter, that "Christian banking should be administered on behalf of those who serve rather than those who own." Similarly, Austin's Pilate is a modern figure, not a sensitive intellectual like London's but a buffoon, a "comparatively honest and tactless Procurator" who, like witless contemporary politicians listening to a powerful interest group, tires of the whole controversy and delivers Jesus to be crucified. If London presents an historical Jesus with a modern—materialist, rationalist—foil such as Lodbrog, Austin makes Jesus himself a modern man, uncertain at times of what is to happen to him but retaining his integrity in the face of a corrupt political system.

Despite the writers' dissatisfaction about the reception of their works, the "Christ stories" of Austin and London were part of a larger public discourse about, and apparently interest in, the life of Christ. Shortly after Austin's book appeared, the *North American Review* published an essay called "Was Jesus a Non-Resistant?" that concluded he would not have supported the current war in Europe. While not commenting directly on the war, London's Christ story asks a similar question about the same concepts of individual conscience versus civil authority. Moreover, in creating a rational character who nonetheless "bows to the gods, all gods" (259) and accepts the will of a powerful, charismatic leader, London offers up an alternative vision of what could happen if a less benign master were to exercise a similar sort of "charm." It is not difficult to read *The Star Rover* and muster outrage for the tortures that Standing and the others were forced to undergo and to conclude that prison reform is necessary. London's "Christ story" and its moral complexities, though, required a level of engagement with the episode's subtleties that readers searching for "red-blood brutalities" may have simply overlooked.

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Note

- ¹ In fact, Corelli's first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886), features a character who experiences divine visions and travels to other worlds.

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