CHAPTER I

A NEW BEGINNING

This chapter looks at the different versions of the birth of Jesus and his adolescent days as found in two of the texts taken for study—*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and *King Jesus*. The other four works do not mention Jesus' birth. An attempt will be made here to analyse these differing versions of the birth of Jesus and his early years and compare it with the depiction of Jesus' birth as found in the Bible, which is considered as the standard norm. The theory of New Historicism as how it is going to be used in this thesis is outlined here. And in this regard, the cultural backgrounds of the two works studied in this chapter would also be looked into.

Whenever an author pens the Christ-story, one always tends to think about how new or how different this is going to be from the Gospel narrative of Christ. Saramago's novel answers this question in an interesting way, where other than the Christ-Magdalene relationship, the author projects God as someone who rejects the Devil's plea to forgive him for His own selfish purposes:

I neither accept nor pardon you, I much prefer you as you are and were it possible. I'd much prefer you to become even worse than you are ... Because the Good that I represent cannot exist without the Evil you represent... for me to be Goodness, it is essential that you should continue to be evil. [GJC.299,300]

As the above lines indicate, the novel attempts to view the story of Christ and in turn Christianity, by keeping the concepts of good and evil in a reciprocal relationship. This is
done through the picturisation of a concerned and reasonable Devil as opposed to a power hungry and dictatorial God, for whom his Son pleads: "Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done." [GJC. 341] The 'good-evil' role reversal is one of the most important aspects of this novel that traces the life of Christ right from his very conception till his crucifixion. The novelist himself defines his work as follows, "My Gospel tries to fill the blank spaces between the various episodes of Jesus' life as narrated in other gospels—with some interpretations of my own."¹

Saramago's 'interpretations of his own' include the above mentioned good-evil role reversal, Christ's introduction to carnal pleasures via Magdalene and lengthy 'business' discussions between God, Christ and the Devil with regard to future matters, especially the rise of Christianity as a major religious power. The novel begins, however, with Jesus' birth being announced not by an angel of peace as seen in the Bible, but by the Prince of Darkness. Saramago not only adds his own interpretations, but also modifies Christ's life story substantially. And the novelist sets out to do this not from the birth of Jesus, but from his very conception.

The Devil's entry is not at all dramatic. A beggar knocks at Joseph's door requesting for food. Mary offers him food, and after having eaten it, the beggar puts sand into the bowl that Mary had given him and says:

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, nothing begins without coming to an end, every beginning comes from some ending... Good woman, you have a child in your womb and that is man's only destiny, to begin and to end, and to end and begin... Who are you who knows so much without hearing it from my own lips, I am an angel, but tell no one. [GJC. 16]
The beggar disappears as Joseph approaches. But the earth in the bowl begins to glow. This, as also the fact that the beggar had predicted Mary's condition upsets Joseph and he confides in the elders of the Synagogue about the mysterious beggar. They come to his house and question Mary, because no one else in the neighbourhood seemed to have seen this beggar. They then bury the bowl containing the glowing soil. But Man's more than anyone else feels that there is some explainable link between the beggar who called himself an angel and her pregnancy. And indeed the beggar appears again, this time as a shepherd.

As in the Bible, there are no wise men in Saramago's gospel. Instead, three shepherds come to visit Mary and her child and offer humble gifts like milk and cheese:

...the third shepherd, whose massive frame seemed to fill the cave, stepped forward and, without so much as glancing at the new-born infant's parents, said, I have kneaded this bread with my own hands and baked it in the fire that burns beneath the earth. No sooner had he spoken than Mary recognized him. [GJC. 55]

He was none other than the beggar who had brought good tidings to Mary. The Bible does talk about shepherds coming to visit Jesus when they see the heavens open and angels singing his praises. But there is no beggar who predicts Mary's pregnant condition.

As far as the biblical narration of Christ's birth is concerned, it is the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that describes this in detail. The Gospel of Matthew talks about Mary,
a virgin, being with child by the Holy Spirit, while she was engaged to Joseph, who when he
comes to know that Mary is with child, secretly decides to break off his engagement with her. But an angel appears to him in a dream and discourages him from doing so. [Matthew 1:20-24] It is also stated in the book of Matthew that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary, at least till Jesus was born: "And he knew her not till she had brought forth her first born son; and he called his name Jesus." [Matthew 1:25]

In Saramago's Gospel, Mary is not a virgin. She is as found in the Bible married to Joseph, a carpenter in Nazareth. And like any other married couple, sex is a part and parcel of their lives. Saramago describes one such scene on the day Jesus was supposed to have been conceived:

Joseph went into the house and shut the door behind him...Wide awake, Mary lay on her back, listening and staring into space as if waiting. Joseph furtively approached and slowly drew back the sheet. She averted her eyes, began tugging at the hem of her tunic and no sooner had she pulled it up as far as her navel than he was on top of her. his tunic hitched up to the waist. Meanwhile Mary had opened her legs, or they had opened by themselves as she had dreamed, and remained open, perhaps because of this sudden lassitude or the mere premonition of a married woman who knows her duty. God, Who is omnipresent, was there, but pure spirit that He is, was unable to see how Joseph's skin came into contact with that of Mary, how his penetrated hers as had been ordained, and perhaps He was not even there when the holy seed of Joseph spilled into the precious womb of Mary, both sacrosanct, being the fount and chalice of life. For in truth, there are things God Himself does not understand, even though He created them. Out in the yard God could neither hear the anguished gasp, which escaped Joseph's lips as he experienced an orgasm nor the gentle moan Mary was unable to repress. [GJC. 11]

This is in complete contrast to the conception of Jesus as depicted in the Bible. In the Gospels, it is the angel Gabriel who appears to Mary and tells her that she is with child by
the Holy Spirit and that the child will be the Messiah. [Luke 1:26-38] In the novel though, it is the angel of darkness, the Devil himself who appears in the guise of a beggar and tells Mary that she is pregnant, a fact that Mary herself knew and was planning to tell her husband that same day.

We thus see that there is a marked departure here from the birth and early years of Christ as seen in the Bible and that there is a lot of subversion taking place here. First and foremost, Saramago outrightly rejects the universal Christian belief that Mary is a virgin. This belief is founded on verses from the Bible [Matthew 1:18-23, Luke 1:26-38], which clearly state the fact that Mary was with child by the Holy Spirit and that this child would be "the Son of the Most High God."

Saramago wants his 'Christ' to be a normal human being and not the Son of God. The entry of the Devil to announce Mary's pregnancy seems to confirm this. For he merely tells her that she is with child. He does not, like the angel of peace in the Bible, Gabriel, tell her that she is to give birth to the Messiah. On the way to Bethlehem, Joseph is questioned by Simeon, a patriarch of another traveller's group, about the very purpose of Jesus' birth. This Simeon is so different from the Simeon in the Bible, who was promised by God that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. [Luke 2:25-35] Through these two incidents what is Saramago doing if not emphatically stating that the Christ of his gospel is a human Christ. And he also seems to be saying that this human Christ is an ordinary child, when it is not three wise men with expensive gifts, who come to visit the future king of Israel, but three shepherds with modest offerings like cheese.
and milk, who come to see the baby. And one of these shepherds is the Devil himself. But then, Saramago is forced to introduce the concept of the kingly Messiah in order to depict the massacre of the children at Bethlehem. In the Bible, it is through the three wise men that King Herod hears of the birth of the Messiah, the King of Jews and orders the massacre of all infants in Bethlehem in the hope that the Saviour also would get killed. But here Herod dreams of prophet Micah telling him: "It was from you, Bethlehem, so insignificant among the families of Judah that the future ruler of Israel has come." [GJC. 70] He conforms this message from the Book of Micah and then decides that all male infants in Bethlehem have to die.

In the Bible, an angel appears to Joseph, warns him of Herod's order and tells him to flee to Egypt. [Matlaw2:13-15] But in the novel, Joseph overhears soldiers speaking of Herod's madness and rushes back to his wife and child. Unlike in the Bible, he does not take his wife and child and go to Egypt. Instead they remain in the cave hoping that the soldiers would miss searching the hillside. They wait till everything is over and then stealthily return to Nazareth. Joseph who comes to know of Herod's intentions, thinks only about his child. He does not do anything to warn other parents. If he had done anything like that it would perhaps have put the safety of his child at risk. By introducing a Joseph who does not warn anyone about the oncoming massacre, Saramago seems to be hinting that the biblical Joseph, who was informed well in advance about the massacre that was going to take place, could have revealed this to the other parents of Bethlehem, who then perhaps could have done something to save their children. And here, there is a similarity with Zachariah in Aarkariyam, who wonders why the birth of the Messiah, the
Saviour of mankind, who shed his blood in order to cleanse the sins of all humanity for all times, had to be at the cost of the most tender and most innocent of all human blood.²

And from then onwards, Saramago's Joseph is plagued by guilt and nightmares where he sees himself as a soldier coming to slay his own child. The Devil too informs Mary that her husband committed a grave sin by not trying to prevent the massacre. Joseph however, I feel, does what any man would probably have done. His prime duty was to protect his child and that he does by wisely deciding to remain in the cave and not escape from there. For had he done so, he could have led his wife and child right onto the oncoming soldiers. Saramago obviously feels strongly about the massacre of the infants, otherwise he would not have introduced feelings of guilt in his Joseph. But it is important to note that this guilty feeling does not come naturally to Joseph. It is through his nightmares that he is constantly reminded that he has done something wrong. And Saramago also seems to be holding the biblical Jesus responsible for the massacre, which is why perhaps Jesus feels guilty about his father's inaction. But here too it is through nightmares that Jesus comes to know about his father's wrongdoing. Saramago's Jesus holds his father responsible for the murder of the children at Bethlehem and leaves home because of this. He also wonders why he has to suffer the miseries of something that his father did. But even the scribes in the Temple cannot explain to him why the guilt of the parents has to be borne by their children. And it is interesting to note that at this juncture in Saramago's Jesus' life, when his mind is so disturbed, he should find solace not in his own house or anywhere else, but in the company of none other than the Devil himself.
There is no mention in the Bible about the period in Christ's life from his first visit to the Temple at Jerusalem at the age of twelve, up to his baptism by John during the fifteenth year of the rule of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. [Luke3:1] Saramago describes this period in a most interesting manner.

Saramago's boy-Christ lives with Pastor, the Devil, tending his flock of sheep. The author seems to be bringing in the imagery of Christ as the 'good shepherd'. (Is 40:11) But it is Pastor here who is the real shepherd. Jesus is only his helpmeet. Initially Jesus finds it difficult to adjust with Pastor, especially because of Pastor's irreverence to God:

Certainly, if God exists He must be only one Lord, but it would be preferable if he were two, then there would be a god for the wolf and one for the sheep, one for the victim and one for the assassin, a god for the condemned man and one for the executioner... I wouldn't like to be a god who guides the hand of the assassin clutching the dagger while presenting the throat that is about to be cut. [GJC. 174]

Pastor also shocks and offends Jesus by his blunt comments on sexuality:

You must choose a sheep... because you'll need it, unless you really are a Eunuch. When these words sank in, the boy felt stunned... Covering his face with both hands, he said in a hoarse voice, This is the word of the Lord, If a man should copulate with an animal he will be punished with death...Cursed is the man who sins with an animal whatever its species, Did your Lord say all these things, Yes, and now leave me alone, abominable creature, For you are not God's creature but belong to the Devil... Pastor raised his arms and called out in a commanding voice to his flock, Listen, listen my Sheep... God has forbidden that anyone should copulate with you, so worry not, but as for shearing you, neglecting you, slaughtering you, and eating you, all these things are permitted, because for this you were created by God's law and are sustained by His Providence [GJC. 177-178]
Gradually though, Jesus learns to take Pastor's provocations in his stride and ignores these completely. He grows so fond of his sheep that when he has to go to attend the Passover festival in Jerusalem, he decides not to choose a sacrificial lamb from Pastor's flock. A generous Pharisee offers him a lamb in Jerusalem. But Jesus begins to wonder why in the first place did lambs have to be sacrificed to God.

Jesus pressed his lamb to his breast unable to fathom why God cannot be appeased with a shellful of milk being poured over His altar, that sap of existence which passes from one being to another, or with a handful of wheat, the basic substance of immortal bread. [GJC. 187]

This may be said to be the first instance in the novel, where Jesus questions, vaguely at least, the authority of God. He decides against sacrificing his lamb. He meets his mother at Jerusalem. As he describes the man with whom he has been living, she realizes that it is the same beggar who had earlier come to her. She warns Jesus that Pastor is a demon and also rebukes him for not sacrificing his lamb. Jesus however takes the lamb back to Pastor, who clips off a part of its ear as a mark of identification that this is Jesus' lamb.

Jesus is eighteen years old when this lamb, which is now a sheep, gets lost in the desert one day. He goes to the desert looking for his sheep and there he meets God in the form of a spiraling cloud. God asks Jesus to be prepared to offer Him his life, in exchange for which he will obtain power and glory. God makes Jesus sacrifice the very sheep, which he had rescued from the sacrificial altar, in order to seal His covenant with him: "from now on you are tied to Me in flesh and blood. ... My signs will accompany you henceforth." [GJC. 198]
Pastor is infuriated when he learns that Jesus sacrificed the sheep and drives him away: "You've learnt nothing, be gone with you." [GJC. 199] Thus ends Jesus' four years in the company of Pastor.

This, in brief is Jose Saramago's retelling of the nativity and early years of Christ, so very different from the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Bible. The most interesting aspect of this retelling is the presence of the Devil. He seems to be a part and parcel of Jesus' life right from the time he was in his mother's womb. The Devil seems to be a catalyst for every turning point in Jesus' early life. He announces Jesus' birth. He visits Jesus when he is born. He informs Mary of her husband's wrongdoing. He accepts Jesus when he leaves home. And later drives Jesus away for listening to God's word and killing a sheep from his flock. Saramago's Jesus is undoubtedly human and not divine. But his Devil seems to be more practical than most human beings as can be seen in his comments on Jesus' religious beliefs:

And which god do you serve, Like my sheep, I have no god, but sheep, atleast, produce lambs for the altars of the Lord, And I can assure you that their mothers would howl like wolves if they were to know... when you adore your God, you don't raise your feet to Him, but your hands, even though you could raise other parts of your body, even what's between your legs, unless you happen to be a eunuch. Overcome with shame and horror, Jesus turned the colour of beetroot. Do not offend the God Whom you do not know, he told him severely on recovering his composure, but Pastor insisted, Who created your body, It was God of course...And did the Devil play any part in creating your body, None whatsoever...Can God disown what you have between your legs as something not of His making,... No, he can't, Why not, Because the Lord cannot undo what He previously willed...In other words, your God is the only warden of a prison where the only captive is your God. [GJC. 174, 176]
The presence of the Devil, the ultimate negative character, is used here to question the positive spiritual element represented by the Jewish scriptures within the text and by the Gospel recordings of Jesus' birth outside of it. The character of the Devil here, is a tool used by Saramago to undermine the prevalent notion as represented by the established version of Christ's birth. Later in the novel, Saramago's God explains to Jesus why he had to spend his teen years with the Devil, "You had to live with someone, it couldn't be with Me, and you didn't wish to be with your family, so that left only the Devil. [GJC. 281]

We thus see Saramago using characters of the other world like God and the Devil, to de-create notions of divinity. The subversion of the birth of Christ is a stepping-stone to this process of de-creation. The Irish writer Robert Graves however, does not employ any such characters to subvert the birth of Christ.

As a fictionalizing biography of Christ, Robert Graves' *King Jesus* is interspersed with a lot of references to Greco-Roman and West Asian mythology, arguments for and against the position of women in Jewish-Christian religious traditions, reinterpretations of several Christian doctrines and a proclamation of Jesus as literally being an earthly king born of true royal lineage. The novel therefore appears to be more complex in nature than other novels of the kind like Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. The focal point here is the subversion of Jesus' birth. But the story actually begins with a precursor to this subversion—the subversion of Jesus' mother, Mary's birth.
Mary’s parents Joachin and Hannah were childless for a long time. During a festival season in Jerusalem, Hannah is taken to a house there by her servant Judith, where she meets a man who gives her wine as well as a 'seed of lotus.' This makes her unconscious and when she wakes up, she finds herself back in her relatives’ house, with Judith pretending that they had never left the house at all. Hannah feels that perhaps she had a dream where the lotus seed was given by an angel of the Lord. In her happiness, Hannah decides to reward her servant, but Judith refuses saying that "I am well recompensed for any service that I may have done you."[KJ. 31] And indeed Judith had already received her reward from Anna, the guardian mother to the holy virgins at the Temple, who had in fact prophesied to Hannah's husband Joachin that their prayers for an offspring were answered by the Lord and that his wife would deliver a baby. Joachin's belief in this prophecy was further strengthened by a young man of the Kenite tribe, whose song also prophesied the birth of a child by Hannah. The prophecy as we have seen, came true through the man whose 'lotus seed' was given to Hannah. And the major players in this prophetic conspiracy were all suitably rewarded—Judith, by Anna and Kenah, the leader of the Kenite tribe by Joachin, who had earlier on hearing his tribesman's song promised Kenah the 'Well of the Jawbone' and ninety two sheep. Kenah, meanwhile on his part, "sent a woman to Anna, the guardian mother of the Temple virgins, to give her a set of carved Egyptian jewels for the casting of lots and for divination..." [KJ.34] The birth of Mary is therefore shown as being arranged by human beings in the name of God.
During this period, the Jews were ruled by Herod. Herod's high priest Simon tells Antipater that he would become the rightful ruler of all Jews only if he marries someone belonging to the lineage of the House of Eli:

...he confided to Antipater a most unorthodox historical theory: that in Israel every ancient chieftan or king had ruled by woman-right: namely by marriage with the hereditary owner of the soil. Adam by marriage with Eve: Abraham by marriage with Sarah ... Caleb by marriage with Ephrath ... David by marriage with Abigail of Carmel and Michal of Hebron ... and every subsequent king of the line of David by marriage with a matrilineal descendant of Michal. He also told Antipater that at the extinction of the monarchy, the female line of Michal was engrossed by the House of Eli, the senior line of priests descended from Aaron, who were on that account styled the Heirs of David or the Royal Heirs ... no king has a true title to rule in Israel unless he is not only a Calebite but also married to the Heiress of Michal. [KJ.56]

For this purpose Antipater has to marry Miriam, the daughter of Joachim and Hannah who is descended from Michal and the marriage has to be kept a secret till Herod's death. According to Simon, this can be done if Miriam passes off as another man's wife until Antipater can acknowledge her as his wife. Simon also reckons that Jerusalem is the center of the Universe—centrally located, lying midway between several nations and that they are at present two years away from the 4th millennium, which is supposed to "close with the appearance of a King who combines the qualities of his predecessors: true-born like Adam, sinless like Enoch, faithful like Abraham, wise like Solomon."[KJ64]

We thus see that the birth of the Messiah depended very much on the concepts of Time and Space and that Jesus' destiny is not made by his heavenly Father as seen in the Bible, but by Herod's High Priest Simon, who orchestrates the secret marriage between Antipater and Miriam, keeping in tune with all the details and prophecies written about
the Messiah. The narrator thus implies that the Messiah's birth was a well-planned and carefully chalked out affair, right from the time of the Messiah's mother's birth.

Nevertheless, though Antipater was in the good books of his father Herod, he soon found himself being accused of parricide by his father, thus facing definite execution. Herod had Antipater imprisoned, but could not prove his accusations against him. Herod's other sons, Archaelus, Philip and Antipas also hoped for Antipater's execution, as this would give them a right to the throne. Herod, though, did not live long to see the death of Antipater, who was eventually killed by the men of a prison warder who owed allegiance to Archaelus. However Antipater had already secretly married Miriam and impregnated her before he was imprisoned by his father.

In the Bible though, as mentioned earlier, Mary is a virgin, who becomes pregnant through divine intervention, and she is informed of all this by the angel Gabriel:

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto the city of Galilee, named Nazareth. To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, that Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in
her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. [Lukel: 26-38]

In the novel too it is Gabriel who gives similar information to Mary, but unlike in the Bible, here he is a richly dressed messenger who tells Mary:

Fear not, Lady, for you have found favour with a glorious King, and if the Lord be willing, you shall conceive and bear a son to him, who shall be the great one, the promised one, the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall bestow on him the throne of David... You are Miriam, the youngest daughter of the line of Michal, and the holy Power of Michal has therefore descended upon you and you shall be joined in love with the glorious one whose paranymph I am; and the holy thing that is born of you shall be called the child of God. Then Simon the High Priest came out from behind the door, where he was hidden and he said: 'Child, this is a messenger of truth. You must believe his words.' So I answered: ' I am your hand-maid. Let it be as you say.' [KJ.130, 131]

The above two quotes may be treated as examples that clearly accentuate the differences between similar occurrences in fiction and in the Bible. And because the messenger in the novel says that the child has to be born in Bethlehem, Mary persuades Joseph to take her there when the time is right, "under colour of visiting the home of your (Joseph's) ancestor David." Later after the child is born, Herod's son Archaleus tells him about this child whose birth was prophesised. He further says that the midwife who attended to the birth had testified that the mother's maidenhead was intact and that therefore the prophecy of Isaiah that "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son" was undoubtedly about this child. [KJ. 139] It also seems that about noon that day the shepherds experienced a suspension of Time. "Every action is frozen for a while—the flight of a heron, dining shepherds, and the shepherds who were watering their flock; life is restored with music
sounded from the grove on the hilltop and a voice announces that the virgin has brought forth and the Light is waking." [KJ. 140] Later three Damascene Jews arrive at Herod's palace for they feel that the King of the Jews would be Herod's son or grandson. Thus Graves asserts his theory that Jesus was indeed, though born in a manger, a true king belonging to the lineage of Herod.

Graves devotes a lot of attention to Herod and his family, especially with regard to Antipater. The Gospels don't talk much about Herod, except in connection with the massacre of the infants at Bethlehem. In the novel, Joseph and Mary are warned by Kenah about Herod's evil designs. They thus escape with the child to Egypt. In the Bible too, it is to Egypt that Joseph and Mary go, but the warning and the instruction to do so comes through an angel. [Matthew 2:13] The Gospels don't talk about their lives in Egypt, except that after Herod is dead, Joseph gets yet another instruction to return to Israel. [Matthew 2:19-21]

The only notable event that the Gospels mention about young Jesus is his first visit to the Temple at Jerusalem at the age of twelve. He stays back in the Temple without informing his parents, listening to and arguing with the authorities and teachers about scriptural matters. And it is on this occasion that Jesus reveals for the first time that he is the Son of God. [Luke 2:41-52]

But in the novel, Jesus' arguments and counter arguments with Jewish teachers, lead him to the revelation that Joseph is not his real father. Whereas the biblical Christ
knows that he is not the son of Joseph, but the Son of God, the fictional Jesus is thoroughly shattered when he realizes that he is a bastard. And he keeps this matter close to his heart, until Mary reveals to him that he is the son of Antipater and the true ruler of Israel. Young Jesus however, rather than wanting to become a political king, wishes to be a ruler who would lead his people towards love and forgiveness.

The various characters in the novel, found at the time of Jesus’ birth, are found in the Gospels too, albeit in a different persona. For example, the guardian of the virgins of the Temple, Anna, is also found in the Gospels. In the novel, she is the one who ‘arranges’ the birth of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Nothing is said about the birth of Mary in the Bible. In the Gospels, Anna is an old widowed prophetess who on seeing baby Jesus, gives thanks to God and says that God would free Jerusalem through this child. [Luke 2:36-38] Likewise Simon, who in the novel, is depicted as the High Priest of Herod, is shown in the Gospels as someone who has been promised by God that he would not die before he has seen the Messiah. [Luke 2:27-35] In the novel, Simon oversees the union of Miriam and Antipater, to enable the prophecy of the Messiah to be fulfilled. And much is said about the Messiah in this novel. According to the narrator:

The word Messiah signifies "the Christ" or the "Anointed One", and is therefore applicable only to an anointed king, not to a commoner however greatly distinguished by spiritual gifts or military achievements. [KJ. 162]

The narrator distinguishes five separate Messiahs—the Son of David, the Son of Joseph, the Son of Man, the Great Priest and the Suffering Servant. Of these, the Suffering
Servant alone is not a warrior Messiah like the Son of David or Son of Joseph, but instead:

...a marred, uncomely, despised man, the scape-goat of the people, reckoned as a sinner, sentenced to dishonourable death, dumb before his accusers and hurried by them to the grave; yet somehow after death to be rewarded with the spoils of victory. [KJ. 164]

There are various prophecies in the Bible regarding the Messiah, especially in the books of the Old Testament. These may be classified into two—those proclaiming a Suffering Messiah and those proclaiming a Kingly Messiah.

There are verses in the Psalms that talk about both kinds of the above-mentioned prophecies. Psalms (2:6-8) talk about the kingly savior, while in Psalms (22:1), we hear the anguished cry of suffering: " My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me and from the words of my roaring?" Jesus exclaims similar words when he is crucified: "And at the nineth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? Which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [Mark 15:34] Psalms (22:18) prophesize the soldiers drawing lots for Jesus' tunic at the time of his crucifixion, which is mentioned thus in Mark (15:24): "And when they had crucified him, they parted his garments, casting lots upon them, what every man should take."

The Book of Daniel also talks about both kinds of prophecies. Daniel (2:44) talks about God establishing a kingdom that will completely destroy all its enemies and last forever. Daniel however says that before this would happen, God's chosen leader would
be killed unjustly. [Daniel 19:26] The book of Jeremiah talks about the kingly Messiah. [Jeremiah 23:5,6] While the prophecy about the Messiah coming from Bethlehem is found in the Book of Micah, where God promises a ruler for Israel who will be from Bethlehem. [Micah 5:2] The Book of Malachi talks not just about Jesus but also about John the Baptist. [Malachi 3:1]

However, it is the book of Isaiah that talks at length both about the Kingly Messiah as well as the Suffering Messiah. Isaiah talks not just about the birth of the Messiah, but also what kind of a person this Messiah would be:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. [Isaiah 9:6] Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him; he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench; he shall bring forth unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth; and the isles shall wait for his law. [Isaiah 42:1-4]

But Isaiah also talks about the Messiah as having to undergo much sufferings [Isaiah 53:3, 7-9] and describes how Jesus would be treated by those who hate him: "As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred than any man and his form more than the sons of men." [Isaiah 52:14] Graves’ concept of the Suffering Servant is based on this prophecy. God also explains about His Chosen One through Isaiah:

Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief; when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied; by his
knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. [Isaiah 53:10,11 ]

All the above biblical verses mainly talk about the Messiah as being promised full authority and majesty but before which he has to undergo a lot of pain and hardships. These are the two main Messianic concepts found in the Bible. However the other Messianic concepts mentioned by Graves are also found in the Bible. For example, the concept of the Messiah as the Son of David is found in the Book of Isaiah [Isaiah 9:7].

And this prophecy is found as being fulfilled through Jesus in the Book of Matthew [Matthew 1:1,16] It is to make Jesus the Son of David that the concept of the Son of Joseph is introduced by Graves. But nothing is said in the Bible about the Messiah being required to be the Son of Joseph. The Messiah is also like a priest, as shown in Psalms (110:4), where it is said, "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." And this is repeated in the New Testament in the Book of Hebrews (6:20) But it is on Daniel's vision that Graves' concept of the Messiah as the Son of Man is based and this too is found in the Bible. [Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14] So all the Messianic concepts that Graves describes are found in the Bible. But he does not say anything at all about the Messiah being the Son of God, which is the central concept of Christianity. However by keeping this concept out of his list, Graves does stay true to his intention of portraying Jesus as an anointed royal king.

This is the main premise of Graves' novel—Jesus is not the Son of God, but the son of a king, by virtue of which he is the rightful king of the Jews. Graves further
elaborates on this aspect in the remaining part of the novel. But the foundation of this premise is laid in the initial part of the novel when Graves discusses the birth of Christ. As we have already seen, he does draw upon various prophecies from the Bible. But the major subversion he introduces is that of Jesus being the Son of Antipater, in effect the grandson of Herod.

The basic aim of the writers taken for study here, is to portray a Christ who is human, has human feelings, acts according to these and sometimes even succumbs to these feelings. Saramago and Graves set out on this task by negating any divine element that may be associated with the birth of Christ. Saramago's Mary is impregnated by her husband Joseph, while in Graves' novel she is impregnated by King Herod's son Antipater. Neither is Mary a virgin in either of these novels, nor is Jesus the Son of God. Graves' Jesus may be a Messiah but he's projected as a human, kingly Messiah. And the early years of Saramago's Jesus is guided by the Devil himself. So both Saramago and Graves, with their varying reinterpretations of the birth of Christ, set the tone for de-linking divine aspects from the persona of Christ by drawing attention to his human side.

Both these writers, as also the others taken for study in this thesis may be seen as being involved in a re-writing of the life of Christ in a manner so different from the one found in the biblical gospels. It's important at this point to look at why these kinds of re-writings, where prominence is given to the humanness of Christ, often at the expense of his divinity, originate. Understanding the cultural backgrounds that produced these specific texts will go a long way in aiding one to be perceptive towards such re-writings;
and in this regard, new historical tenets may best help in approaching the entire issue of re-writing. New historicism basically deals with texts as not being autonomous but as a part of their cultural contexts, where social, religious and political ideologies as well as occurrences would have played prominent roles in shaping them. The term 'new historicism' in itself was first coined by Stephen Greenblatt to refer to such a kind of study. New historicists argue that:

literary texts should not be detached from the wider network of texts and other cultural activities or institutions from which they are generated; typically a new historicist reading of a literary text will involve reference to non-literary texts (legal documents, sermons, travelogue) demonstrating the presence of a similar governing discourse.

All the works used in this thesis may be better understood when they're analysed by using new historicism as a critical tool. We may begin with Jose Saramago's text. Saramago clearly states on the back cover of his novel, that he's got interpretations of his own with regard to the life of Christ. However, in a country like Portugal, where Roman Catholicism has a strong influence in socio-political matters, it is not surprising that these so called 'interpretations' of Saramago's were frowned upon. To a very large extent, Saramago's book can be better appreciated if it is placed within the socio-political locale of Portugal.

Portugal's tryst with democracy did not begin until the latter quarter of this century. Till then it was by and large an autocrat governed nation. Before the 20th century, when the Church and the Crown were often united, Christianity or rather Roman Catholicism was a major power block. Prior to Portugal becoming a republic in 1910, Roman Catholicism was the religion of the State. This power may have diminished a bit
in the present century, especially after the rise of Antonio Salazar after 1926. Under Salazar's reign, Portugal became an:

'Estrada Nova' (New State), a subdued Catholic version of a fascist regime ... In a changing world, the Portugese dictatorship stood out in its grim and eerie immobility. Backed, cowed into submission, a European country was ruled by senile generals and admirals, by a swarm of spies and by a band of faceless bureaucrats all under the rod of a terrible old man. The social landscape seemed unalterable. Religion and official ideology were presented as immutable factors with obedience as the highest virtue.⁵

Even after the fall of Salazar, Roman Catholicism has enjoyed being the premier religion in a state that is considered to be secular in nature. Two important documents relating to religious freedom, the 1971 Law on Religious Freedom and the 1940 Concordat between Portugal and the Holy See, grants several privileges to the Roman Catholic Church that are not enjoyed by other religions. An example of this is the exemption of tax for the Roman Catholic Church from the country's value added tax, whereas other religions can be exempted only from those expenditures directly related to religion. It was only in 1999 that a new law on religious freedom was drafted and introduced in the National Assembly, which would enable minority religions to enjoy more of the privileges that were earlier the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church. All these factors seem to give an indication of the presence of Christianity/Roman Catholicism in matters of the State.

By and large, the centrality of the Church remains unquestioned even with regard to the Portugal of today. A United States government report on international religious freedom with reference to Portugal, states:
The Catholic Church has exclusive control over the naming of military, prison, and hospital chaplains ... Public secondary school curriculums include an optional course called "religion and morals". This course functions as a survey of world religions and is taught by a lay person. It can be used to give Catholic religious instruction. The Catholic Church must approve all teachers for this course.6

We therefore see that there is an attempt by the Catholic Church in Portugal to shape the general Portugese attitude and way of life according to its own dogmas and principles.

Born in 1922 in such a religiously oriented country, Saramago was involved in publishing and translation activities for a long time. His first novel Country of Sin was published in 1947. His next work came well after the toppling of the Salazar regime. This was Manuel de Pintura E Caligrapha published in 1977. That he was against the dictatorial rule of Salazar is evident from his joining the Communist Party of Portugal (which secretly opposed Salazar) in 1969. But the power of the Church is evident here too, when Sarmago, on criticising the Under Secretary of State for attempting to censure his work for the European Literature contest, was reminded by his colleagues in the Communist Party that censorship was an accepted fact in the Soviet Union and other Communist nations. But it is to be noted that The Gospel According to Jesus Christ is not the first book where Saramago criticizes the Christian establishment. In Baltazar and Blimunda, Saramago depicts the harsh and cruel reality of the Inquisition set in the Lisbon of 1711. Saramago makes a point about the Inquisition in this novel too. He describes it as the "Tribunal of the Holy Office." In the novel, we find God telling Jesus that the Inquisition is a necessary evil:
The Inquisition is a police force, a tribunal, and will, therefore, pursue, judge and sentence its enemies ... to prison, exile, the stake ... thousands upon thousands of men and women will be burnt at the stake. They will be burnt alive because they have believed in you, others because they will doubt you. [GJC.298]

Such statements by God, the depiction of the love making scene between Jesus and Magdalene, and God being shown as a tyrant, lusting for power, blood and martyrdom so as to further strengthen His omnipotence, may make any believer flinch. But a close reading of *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, without looking at the various contextual factors surrounding it may induce one to out rightly judge the novel as being blasphemous in tone and nature. And Saramago's work may be better understood when we study it from the perspective of the influence of the Church on the general Portugese culture. This is quite implicit by the fact that the 'gap' in Jesus' life that Saramago attempted to fill, was not taken kindly to by the Church.

*King Jesus* too offers a fresh perspective when it's placed within the socio-cultural background of Ireland and Robert Graves' beliefs and ideologies. Graves was brought up in an upper class, patriotic and strict family and he viewed his father as an oppressor. Graves modern views were often in conflict with those of his family's. He joined the First World War to escape the confines of his home. But war was a disturbing experience for him. He married twice, but was also involved in relationships with other women.

Graves’ most popular works are *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. These books based on the Roman Emperor of the 1st century A.D. were later serialized by the B.B.C.
Other important works include *The White Goddess, The Greek Myths, Lawrence and the Arabs, King Jesus*, etc. We have already seen how Graves has subverted concepts considered to be of great importance to Christians. But this was not an exceptional case as far as Graves is concerned. He has also made similar subversions with regard to Greek, Roman, Arab and Jewish mythology. "The Greek Myths in particular set Graves afoul of classics departments in England and America ... Indeed in his career there was little that Graves did not touch upon and few 'experts' whom he did not offend by venturing into their fields." Seven years after the publication of *King Jesus*, he co-authored *The Nazarene Gospels* with Joshua Podro. Here he tries to correct what he felt were 'anachronisms' and inaccuracies introduced by Christian scribes to the Gospels. He makes a similar attempt in *The Hebrew Myths*.

Graves' rewritings of Christian and Jewish beliefs and concepts, especially his notion of the 'royal king' may be linked to his Celtic descent. The early Celts were a powerful race, aristocratic in nature with a social order comprising of Kings, warriors, freemen, farmers and slaves. They also had a highly evolved religion with the Druids as priests forming a powerful class by themselves. "Almost fanatical in their religious fervour, the pagan Celts were dominated by powerful, highly aristocratic priests, the Druids who often continued the rite of king with their priesthood." But the rise of the Roman Empire saw the decline of this Celtic power. However, Celtic traditions continued to thrive in Ireland and also Scotland, which remained untouched by Roman domination:

It was there that the old Celtic traditions and way of life survived and were written down by the scribes of a Celtic Church, of the Fifth Century AD and deeply sympathetic to the heritage of its people... Ireland fell in the
Fifth century, not to disciplined Roman soldiers, but to the equally disciplined Roman church. All the Celtic fervour for religion was now transferred to Christianity—a very Celtic type of Christianity, noted for its austere devotions and the selfless dedication of its clerics. The detailed and sophisticated laws were now transformed for Christian purposes; the glorious art once used to adorn the pagan warriors and their shrines and honour the gods now served to praise God in the form of superbly illuminated manuscripts, the old pagan symbolism of spirals and circles, taking on a new meaning.¹⁰

So we see that though the Celts became Christians, they were still loyal to their pagan traditions of earlier times. The inclusion of pagan elements in King Jesus, though related to Jewish traditions may be seen in the light of Robert Graves' Celtic background. These may be better understood when we identify Graves as belonging to the Celtic race and being influenced by Celtic culture and traditions, and this is especially true when we look at how the concept of king is described in Irish narrative literature:

The sacral kingship was both the pivot and the foundation of the social order, and the king was its personification; if his conduct or even his person were blemished in any way, this blemish would be visited on his kingdom, diminishing its integrity and prosperity. As the instrument of justice, the king must be fair and flawless in his decisions... The welfare of the King and his people depended on his justice or 'fir flathemon' (truth or righteousness of a prince.)¹¹

The Christ character's relentless insistence in King Jesus to uphold a particular image of himself as the righteous King of the Jews, who does everything according to the book, may be seen as being symbolic to the norms adhered to by Celtic kings. The relationship between Jesus and Simon, the high priest, may also be understood as being rooted in Celtic tradition. "In primitive Irish and Celtic society, the twin guardians of social order were the king and the druid or hieratic poet."¹² This is the case in the novel too, where Simon is the one who guides Jesus towards fulfilling his mission as the King
of the Jews. All these factors show how *King Jesus* the novel and especially the Christ-character are very much linked to the author's socio-cultural and religious background. Similar is the case with Saramago's Christ too, as also both writers' attempt to neutralize the divinity of their Christ-characters. And after concentrating on the birth of Christ, this is done in a very direct and at times blunt manner by underscoring the sexuality of Christ, which becomes the area of contention in the next chapter.
NOTES


7 <http://www.robertgraves.org/bio.php>

8 Ibid.


10 Ibid, 87, 140.


12 Ibid, 162.