

ST CHRISTOPHER, MARTYR (DATE UNKNOWN)

“CHRISTOPHER before his baptism was named Reprobus, but afterwards he was named Christopher, which is as much as to say as bearing Christ, for that he bare Christ in four manners: he bare Him on his shoulders by conveying and leading, in his body by making it lean, in mind by devotion, and in his mouth by confession and preaching.

“Christopher was of the lineage of the Canaanites, and he was of a right great stature and had a terrible and fearful face and appearance. And he was twelve cubits of length, and as it is read in some histories that, when he served and dwelled with the king of Canaan, it came in his mind that he would seek the greatest prince that was in the world, and him would he serve and obey. And so far he went that he came to a right great king, of whom the renown generally was that he was the greatest of the world. And when the king saw him, he received him into his service, and made him to dwell in his court. Upon a time a minstrel sang before him a song in which he named oft the Devil, and the king, who was a Christian man, when he heard him name the Devil, made anon the sign of the cross on his visage. And when Christopher saw that, he had a great marvel what sign it was and wherefore the king made it, and he demanded of him. And because the king would not say, he said: ‘If thou tell me not, I shall no longer dwell with thee’; and then the king told him, saying: ‘Alway when I hear the Devil named I fear that he should have power over me, and I garnish me with this sign that he grieve me not nor annoy me.’ Then Christopher said to him: ‘Doubtest thou the Devil that he hurt thee? Then is the Devil more mighty and greater than thou art. I am then deceived of my hope and purpose, for I had supposed I had found the most mighty and the most greatest lord in the world, but I commend thee to God, for I will go seek him for to be my lord, and I his servant.’

“And then he departed from this king and hasted him for to seek the Devil. And as he went by a great desert he saw a great company of knights, of which a knight cruel and horrible came to him and demanded whither he went, and Christopher answered him and said: ‘I go seek the Devil, for to be my master.’ And he said: ‘I am he that thou seekest.’ And then Christopher was glad, and bound him to be his servant perpetual and took him for his master and lord. And as they went together by a common way, they found there a cross erect and standing. And anon as the Devil saw the cross he was afeared and fled, and left the right way, and brought Christopher about by a sharp desert. And after, when they were past the cross, he brought him to the highway that they had left. And when Christopher saw that, he marvelled, and demanded whereof he doubted and had left the high and fair way and had gone so far about by so rough a desert. And the Devil would not tell him in no wise. Then Christopher said to him: ‘If thou wilt not tell me, I shall anon depart from thee and shall serve thee no more.’ Wherefore the Devil was constrained to tell him, and said: ‘There was a man called Christ which was hanged on the cross, and when I see His sign I am sore afraid and flee from it wheresoever I see it.’ To whom Christopher said: ‘Then He is greater and more mightier than thou, when thou art afraid of His sign, and I see well that I have laboured in vain when I have not founden the greatest lord of the world. And I will serve thee no longer; go thy way then, for I will go seek Christ.’

“And when he had long sought and demanded where he should find Christ at

last he came into a great desert, to an hermit that dwelt there, and this hermit preached to him of Jesu Christ and informed him in the faith diligently and said to him : ' This King whom thou desirest to serve requireth the service that thou must oft fast.' And Christopher said to him : ' Require of me some other thing and I shall do it, for that which thou requirest I may not do.' And the hermit said : ' Thou must then wake and make many prayers.' And Christopher said to him : ' I wot not what that is ; I may do no such thing.' And then the hermit said to him : ' Knowest thou such-and-such a river, where many be perished and lost ? ' To whom Christopher said : ' I know it well.' Then said the hermit : ' Because thou art noble and high of stature and strong in thy members thou shalt be resident by that river, and thou shalt bear over all them that shall pass there, which shall be a thing right pleasing to our Lord Jesu Christ whom thou desirest to serve, and I hope He shall show Himself to thee.' Then said Christopher : ' Certainly this service may I well do, and I promise to Him for to do it.' Then went Christopher to this river and made there a dwelling-place for himself, and bare a great pole in his hand instead of a staff by which he sustained himself in the water, and bare over all manner of people without ceasing. And there he abode, thus doing, many days.

" And in a time, as he slept in his lodge, he heard the voice of a child which called him and said : ' Christopher, come out and bear me over.' Then he awoke and went out, but found no man. And when he was again in his house he heard the same voice, and he ran out and found nobody. The third time he was called and came thither and found a child beside the edge of the river, which prayed him goodly to bear him over the water. And then Christopher lift up the child on his shoulders, and took up his staff, and entered into the river for to pass. And the water of the river arose and swelled more and more ; and the child was heavy as lead, and alway as he went farther the water increased and grew more, and the child more and more waxed heavy, insomuch that Christopher had great anguish and was afeared to be drowned. And then he was escaped with great pain, and passed the water and set the child aground, he said to the child : ' Child, thou hast put me in great peril ; thou weighest almost as I had all the world upon me : I might bear no greater burden.' And the child answered : ' Christopher, marvel thee nothing ; for thou hast not only borne all the world upon thee, but thou hast borne Him that created and made all the world, upon thy shoulders. I am Jesu Christ, the King whom thou servest in this work. And because that thou know what I say to be the truth, set thy staff in the earth by thy house and thou shalt see to-morrow that it shall bear flowers and fruit,' and anon He vanished from his eyes. And then Christopher set his staff in the earth, and when he arose on the morn he found his staff like a palm tree, bearing flowers, leaves and dates.

" And then Christopher went into the city of Lycia, and understood not their language. Then he prayed our Lord that he might understand them and so he did. And as he was in this prayer, the judges supposed that he had been a fool, and left him there. And then when Christopher understood the language, he covered his visage and went to the place where they martyred Christian men, and comforted them in our Lord. And then the judges smote him in the face, and Christopher said to them : ' If I were not a Christian, I should avenge mine injury.' And then Christopher pitched his rod in the earth and prayed to our Lord that for to convert the people it might bear flowers and fruit ; and anon it did so. And then he converted eight thousand men. And then the king sent two

knights for to fetch him, and they found him praying, and durst not tell him so. And anon after the king sent as many more, and anon they set them down for to pray with him. And when Christopher arose, he said to them : ‘ What seek ye ? ’ And when they saw him in the visage, they said to him : ‘ The king hath sent us, that we should lead thee bound unto him.’ And Christopher said to them : ‘ If I would, ye should not lead me to him, bound or unbound.’ And they said to him : ‘ If thou wilt go thy way, go quit, where thou wilt. And we shall say to the king that we have not found thee.’ ‘ It shall not be so,’ said he, ‘ but I shall go with you.’ And then he converted them in the Faith, and commanded them that they should bind his hands behind his back and lead him so bound to the king. And when the king saw him he was afearcd and fell down off the seat ; and his servants lifted him up again. And then the king enquired his name and his country ; and Christopher said to him : ‘ Before I was baptized I was named Reprobus, and after I am Christopher ; before Baptism, a Canaanite, now a Christian man.’ To whom the king said : ‘ Thou hast a foolish name, that is, to wit, of Christ crucified, who could not help Himself and may not profit to thee. How therefore, thou cursed Canaanite, why wilt thou not do sacrifice to our gods ? ’ To whom Christopher said : ‘ Thou art rightfully called Dagnus, for thou art the death of the world and fellow of the Devil, and thy gods be made with the hands of men.’ And the king said to him : ‘ Thou wert nourished among wild beasts and therefore thou mayst not say but wild language and words unknown to men. And if thou wilt now do sacrifice to the gods, I shall give to thee great gifts and great honours, and if not, I shall destroy thee and consume thee by great pains and torments.’ But for all this he would in no wise do sacrifice, wherefore he was sent into prison, and the king did behead the other knights, that he had sent for him, whom he had converted.

“ And after this he sent into the prison to St Christopher two fair women, of whom the one was named Nicaea and the other Aquilina, and promised to them many great gifts if they could draw Christopher to sin with them. And when Christopher saw that, he set him down in prayer, and when he was constrained by them that embraced him to move, he arose and said : ‘ What seek ye ? For what cause be ye come hither ? ’ And they, which were afraid of his appearance and clearness of his visage, said : ‘ Holy saint of God, have pity on us so that we may believe in that God that thou preachest.’ And when the king heard that, he commanded that they should be let out and brought before him. To whom he said : ‘ Ye be deceived. But I swear to you by my gods that, if ye do no sacrifice to my gods, ye shall anon perish by evil death.’ And they said to him : ‘ If thou wilt that we shall do sacrifice, command that the places may be made clean and that all the people may assemble at the temple.’ And when this was done they entered into the temple, and took their girdles and put them about the necks of the gods, and drew them to the earth and brake them all in pieces ; and said to them that were there : ‘ Go and call physicians and leeches, for to heal your gods.’ And then, by the commandment of the king, Aquilina was hanged, and a right great and heavy stone was hanged at her feet so that her members were most piteously broken. And when she was dead and passed to our Lord, her sister Nicaea was cast into a great fire, but she issued out without harm, all whole, and then they made to smite off her head, and so suffered death.

“ After this Christopher was brought before the king, and the king commanded that he should be beaten with rods of iron, and that there should be set upon his

head a cross of iron red hot and burning, and then after he had made a seat of iron and had Christopher bound thereon, and after fire set under it, and cast therein pitch. But the seat melted like wax, and Christopher issued out without any harm or hurt. And when the king saw that, he commanded that he should be bound to a strong stake and that he should be through-shotten with arrows by forty knights archers. But none of the knights might attain him, for the arrows hung in the air about, nigh him, without touching. Then the king weened that he had been through-shotten by the arrows of the knights, and addressed him for to go to him. And one of the arrows returned suddenly from the air and smote him in the eye and blinded him. To whom Christopher said: 'Tyrant, I shall die to-morrow. Make a little clay, mixed with my blood, and anoint therewith thine eye, and thou shalt receive health.' Then by the commandment of the king he was led for to be beheaded, and then there made he his orison, and his head was smitten off, and so suffered martyrdom. And the king then took a little of his blood and laid it on his eye, and said: 'In the name of God and of St Christopher!' and was anon healed. Then the king believed in God, and gave commandment that if any person blamed God or St Christopher, he should anon be slain with the sword."

That, with a few verbal alterations, is the story of St Christopher from the *Golden Legend* as put into English by William Caxton, a story known all over Christendom, both East and West. From it arose the popular belief that he who looked on an image of the saint should not that day suffer harm: a belief that was responsible for the putting of large statues or frescoes representing him opposite the doors of churches (some of which remain in our own country), so that all who entered might see it; he was the patron-saint of travellers and was invoked against perils from water, tempests and plagues; and in recent times has found a revived popularity as the patron of motorists.

The legend of St Christopher did not take its final forms until the middle ages: his name, "Christ-bearer", from having a spiritual meaning was given a material one as well, and the story was embroidered by the liveliness of medieval fancy. Except that there was a martyr Christopher, nothing is certainly known about him: the Roman Martyrology says that he suffered in Lycia under Decius, shot with arrows and beheaded after he had been preserved from the flames.

The many interesting points which arise in connection with St Christopher are discussed very thoroughly by Dr R. Hindringer in the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. ii, cc. 934-936, and by H. F. Rosenfeld, *Der hl. Christophorus* (1937). There undoubtedly was a St Christopher whose cult was pretty widely spread in East and West. A church in Bithynia was dedicated to him A.D. 452. The primitive legend tells us nothing about Christopher's search for a master or about his task of transporting wayfarers across a river, but his gigantic stature and terrible appearance are dwelt upon, and also the staff which grew and blossomed when struck into the earth. The incident of Aquilina and her companion is likewise prominent, and we have the same preposterous series of fruitless attempts to put the martyr to death. The Latin and Greek texts of the earlier legend in various recensions have been printed in the *Acta Sanctorum*, July, vol. vi; in the *Analecta Bollandiana*, vol. i, pp. 121-148, and x, 393-405; and in H. Usener's *Acta S. Marinae et S. Christophori*. There is also a Syriac text among the manuscripts of the British Museum (Addit. 12, 174). For St Christopher in art see Künstle, *Ikongraphie*, vol. ii, pp. 154-160, and Drake, *Saints and their Emblems*; and from the point of view of folk-lore Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, vol. ii, pp. 65-75; but the majority of the folk-lorists, H. Günther for instance, are only intent upon finding alleged pagan origins for medieval devotional practices.