

FIRST CHRISTMAS



ALASTAIR MACDONALD

Illustrations by Adel Nassief

FIRST
CHRISTMAS



To

From



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 To Charlene 

PREFACE

I wrote *First Christmas* so that the story of the birth of Jesus Christ could be easily shared by families and friends. It is my hope that *First Christmas* will help bring a new awakening to the celebration of Christmas, and in the process bring us all together as we share in the wonder of the birth of Jesus Christ.

May God bless you and your family this Christmas.

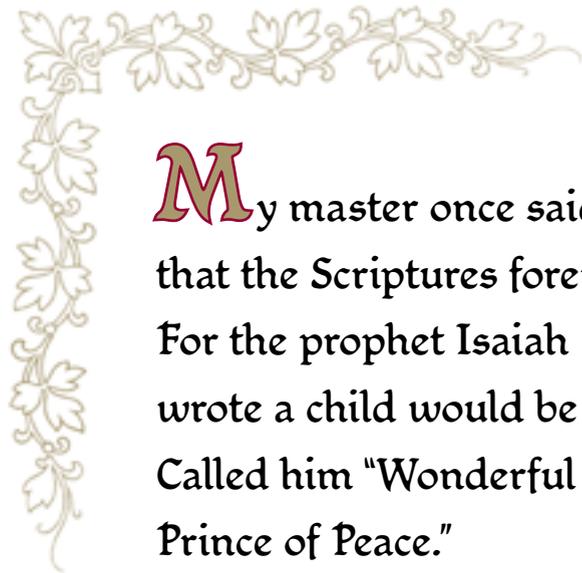
ALASTAIR MACDONALD



FIRST CHRISTMAS



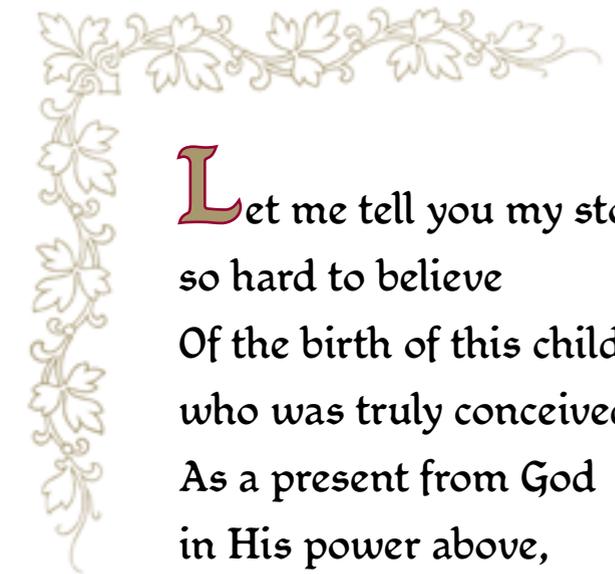
I'm a tired old donkey;
my friends call me Zeke.
My body's now aching;
my legs are so weak.
But once I was handsome
and strong as an ox,
As I carried my master,
his tools and workbox.



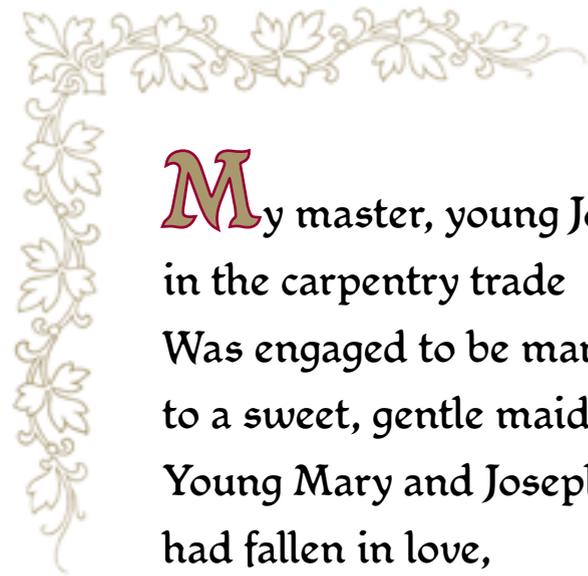
My master once said
that the Scriptures forewarn,
For the prophet Isaiah
wrote a child would be born.
Called him "Wonderful Counselor ...
Prince of Peace."

This child, he promised,
would give us release
From a world full of anger,
trouble and strife;
Would grow into a man
who will give us new life.





Let me tell you my story
so hard to believe
Of the birth of this child
who was truly conceived
As a present from God
in His power above,
His Son, the Messiah,
a gift of His love.



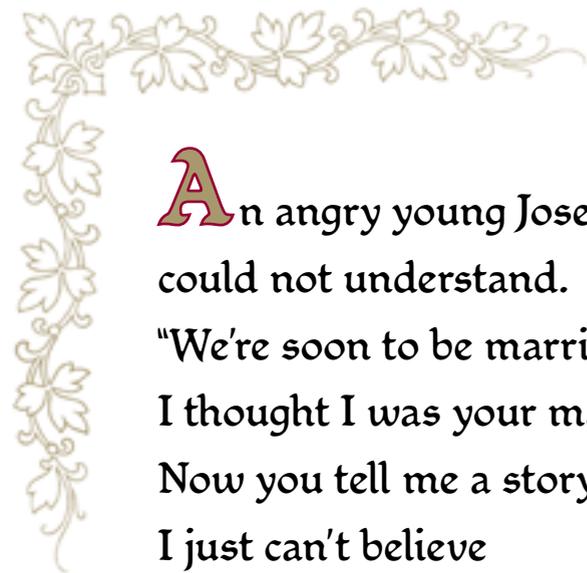
My master, young Joseph,
in the carpentry trade
Was engaged to be married
to a sweet, gentle maid.
Young Mary and Joseph
had fallen in love,
Like a lightning flash
that had come from above.





But one day dear Mary,
with tears in her eyes,
Confided in Joseph
a startling surprise.
“Last night came an angel,
bright, shining, and white,
Into my room,
causing me such a fright.
But the angel spoke gently,
my fears went away
As I listened intently
and heard him say:

‘You’ve been blessed among women
by God up above.
It is you God has chosen
to carry and love
A child so special
in a world truly blind,
He’s the Son of God;
He will save all mankind!’”



An angry young Joseph
could not understand.
"We're soon to be married;
I thought I was your man!
Now you tell me a story
I just can't believe
That in you, somehow God
has already conceived
A baby! A baby?
How could this be true?"
And he stomped away,
getting angry anew.



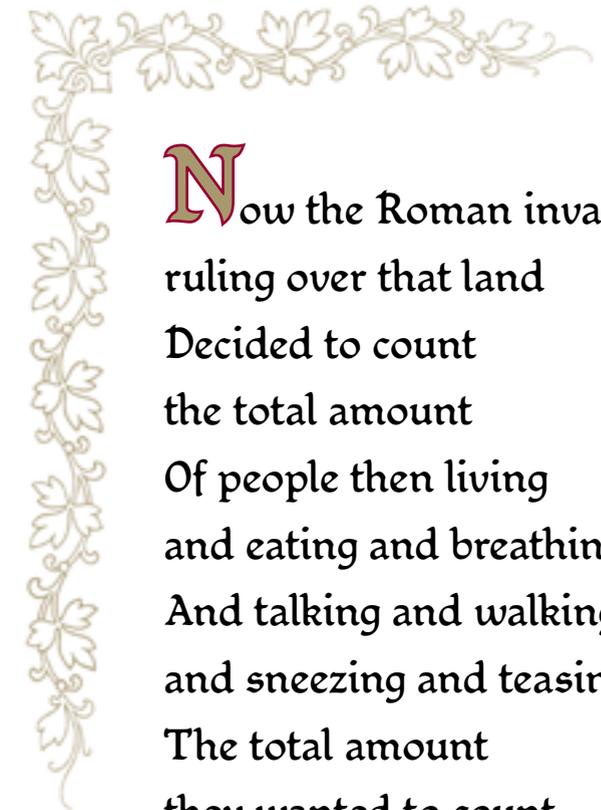


That night in his bed,
Joseph tossed and he turned,
Then awoke with a start,
shocked at what he had learned.
In a dream so intense
it almost seemed real
An angel appeared
making him an appeal.

"Look after sweet Mary,
you truly are blessed
To provide for God's Son,
so now do your best
To care for his mother
and give them a home.
For God knows you'll love him
as he were your own."

When Joseph told Mary
about this strange dream,
He gazed into her eyes
with a look that did seem
So deeply concerned,
full of love and care,
She knew he'd be with her
no matter what fared.





Now the Roman invaders
ruling over that land
Decided to count
the total amount
Of people then living
and eating and breathing
And talking and walking
and sneezing and teasing.
The total amount
they wanted to count
So they could exact
the maximum tax
From the citizens of that land.

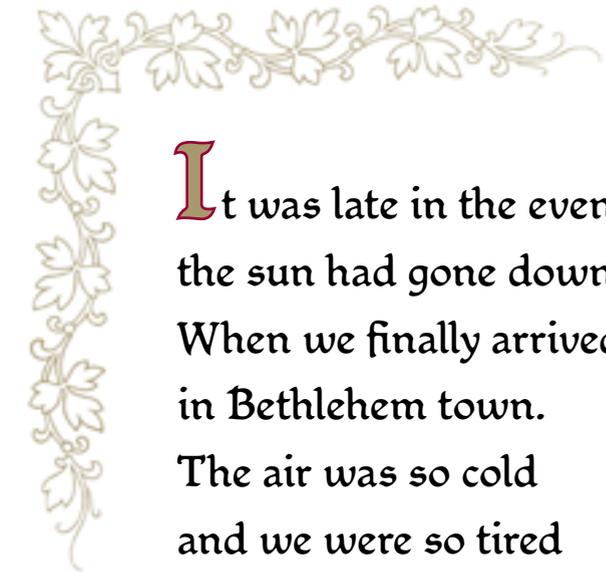
So the Roman consul
announced a decree
That all of the people
without delay
To their family city
they must go back
To be counted and also
to pay their tax.



Master Joseph, descended from David the King,
Was born and grew up in Bethlehem.
So Joseph made plans for us all to walk



From the Nazareth hills to the Bethlehem rocks,
A trip on a dangerous and dusty road
A wife with child and a heavy load.



It was late in the evening,
the sun had gone down
When we finally arrived
in Bethlehem town.
The air was so cold
and we were so tired
As we searched for an inn
with food and a fire.

But nary an inn
could be found in the town
With a bed to sleep,
and a room safe and sound.
"All our rooms are taken!
No place for you here!"
And Joseph began
to worry and fear . . .

*J*ust then sweet Mary
looked up in alarm
"The baby is coming,
let him come to no harm!"
An innkeeper,
seeing her precarious state,
Took pity upon us
and told us to wait.

"There's room in my stable,
a warm place to sleep,
If you don't mind donkeys,
cows, oxen, and sheep.
It is next to the inn,
down this alleyway here.
Just open the door;
you'll have nothing to fear."

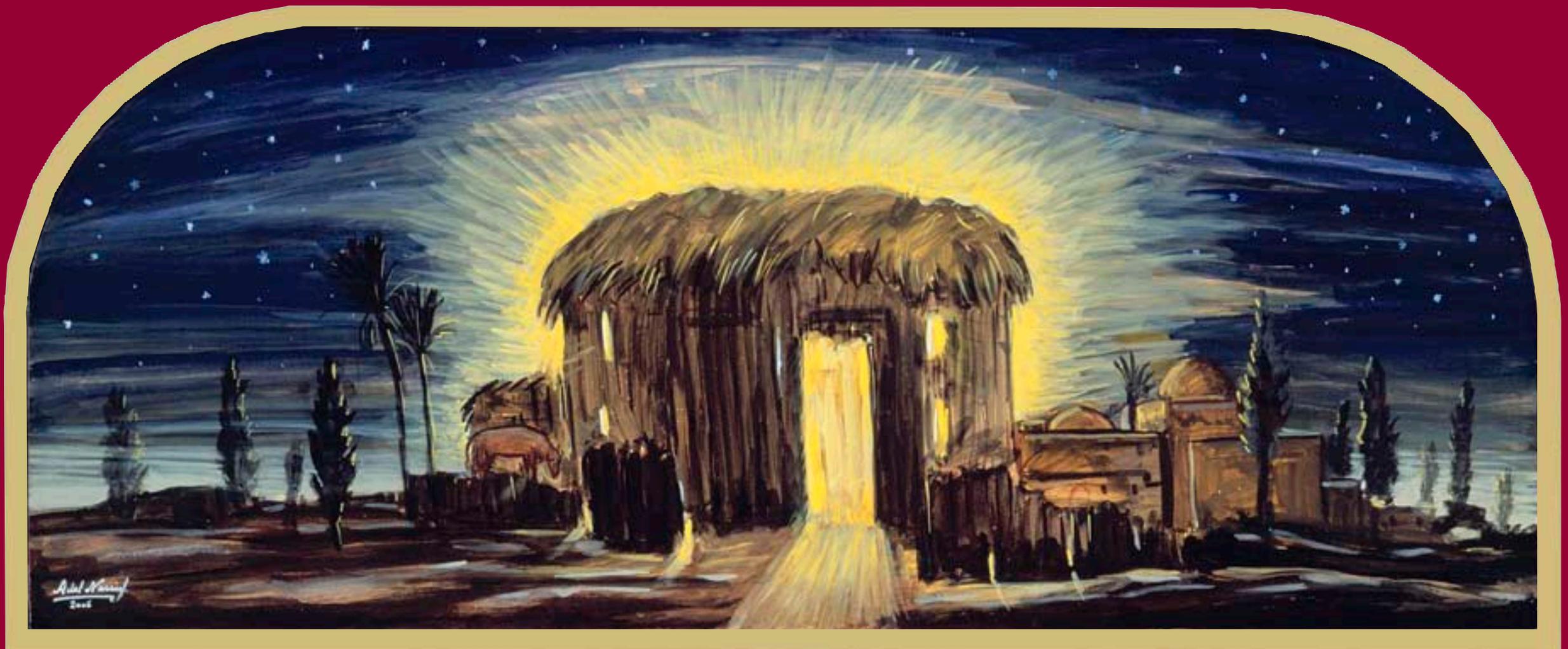




Into the stable
we moved with haste,
Where Mary and Joseph
quietly embraced.
"Don't worry dear Mary,"
he gently said,
"For our faith in our God,
He has given this shed.
With its donkeys and cows,
oxen and sheep,
I really don't know how
we'll get any sleep!"

Before Mary could laugh,
she felt a strong pain.
"I think my time's coming!"
she told him again.
"In this empty corner,
the hay is clean.
I will set up a bed
fit for a queen!"
So he laid down a blanket,
smooth and dry,
And fashioned a pillow
where Mary could lie.

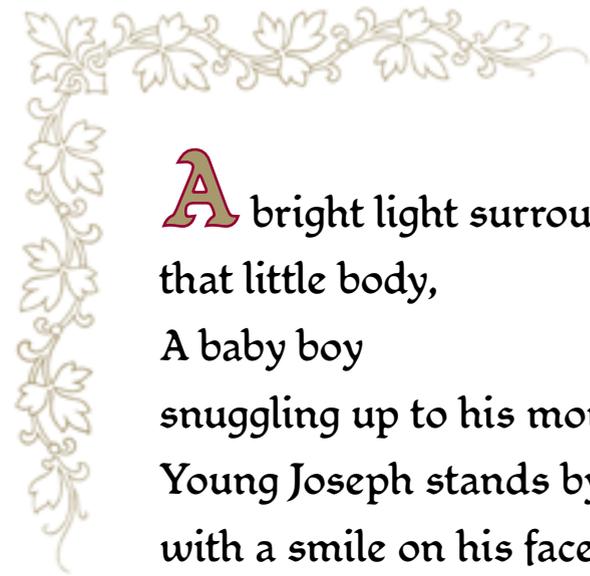




The hour is late, the town is quiet;
The air is clear, the stars shine bright.
The only sound is a distant bark

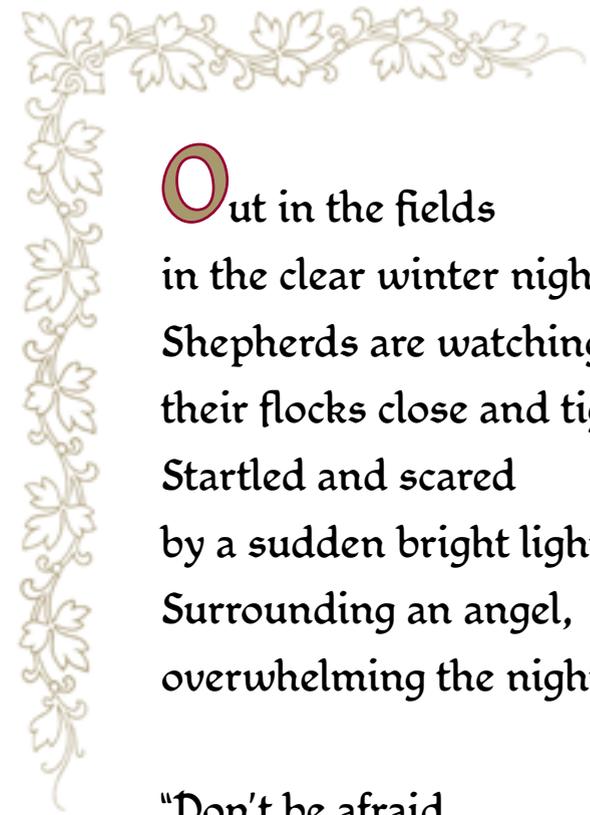


Faintly heard coming through the dark.
Within the stable, a baby's cry!
A child is born. Oh my! Oh my!



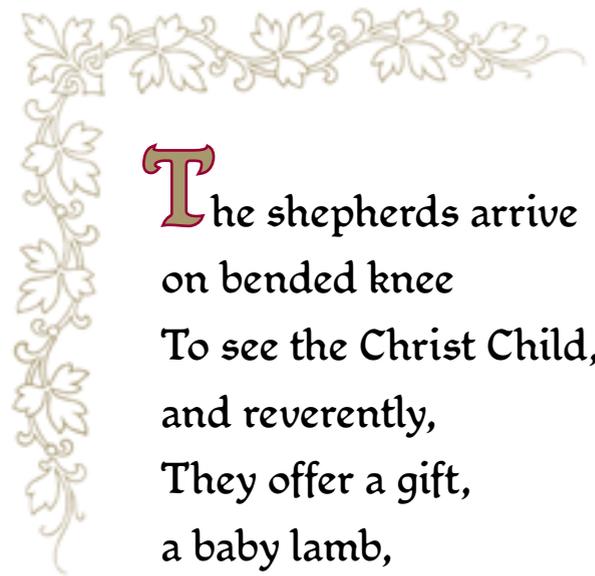
A bright light surrounds
that little body,
A baby boy
snuggling up to his mommy.
Young Joseph stands by
with a smile on his face,
Looking in wonderment,
touched by his fate.
The donkeys and cows,
oxen and sheep
Quietly watch
as the baby sleeps.





Out in the fields
in the clear winter night,
Shepherds are watching
their flocks close and tight.
Startled and scared
by a sudden bright light
Surrounding an angel,
overwhelming the night.

“Don’t be afraid
for I bring you good news.
For great joy and peace
will surely ensue.
This night in your village
a baby is born,
God’s son the Messiah,
Jesus Christ the Lord!
You will find this baby
in swaddling bands,
Lying in a manger
where the inn stands.”



The shepherds arrive
on bended knee
To see the Christ Child,
and reverently,
They offer a gift,
a baby lamb,
Giving thanks to God
as best they can.





As the shepherds return to their flocks of sheep,
With the rest of Bethlehem fast asleep,
Brightness takes over the nighttime skies,
The sound of music is heard to arise.
A throng of angels high above
Is singing God's praises, proclaiming His love.



What a wonderful sight it is to see
As the angels sing their melody:
A song of glory to God on high;
A song of peace on earth come nigh;
A song of wondrous things to come;
A song to celebrate God's Son.



Into the stars
the angels ascend
As the light recedes
and quiet returns.
A baby looks up
from the manger stall
At me, Zeke the donkey,
how well I recall!
'Twas a night to remember,
I'll never forget
When Jesus, the Christ Child,
and I first met.



Coptic Christian Icons

The Orthodox Coptic Church is one of the oldest Christian churches. Founded and based in Egypt, the church can trace its beginnings back to 41 AD, when the apostle Mark—who wrote the gospel of the same name—founded a Christian church based in Alexandria. Many believe the church dates back even farther, to the time when Jesus and his family fled to Egypt to avoid the slaughter of young male children by Herod.

The iconic art tradition of Coptic Christians is said to date back to the early days of the church. Examples of this art can be traced back to at least the third century AD. It is believed it was used to instruct a largely illiterate population that was being converted to Christianity from pagan religions, in the stories and traditions of Christianity. It provided a visual means of instruction and understanding in much the same way that stained-glass windows were used in Europe during the Middle Ages.

In the first three centuries after the founding of the church, Christianity became a major force in Egypt. There is evidence many of the temples previously used for pagan worship were assumed by Christianity. Many of these temples were reportedly decorated with art that the Coptic Christians plastered over and painted with their own Christian images. Few examples remain, in part because early archaeologists in Egypt removed much of the Coptic Christian art to find the more ancient Egyptian art and paintings. At the same time, Egypt became

the center and the model for the monastic tradition in the Christian faith. Many monastic orders were founded in Egypt, and their buildings continue to provide some of the earliest examples of Coptic Christian art.

The style of Coptic icons is believed to have been influenced not only by the art of ancient Egypt but also by the Greek or Hellenic artistic tradition. Alexandria was originally founded by Alexander the Great when he invaded Egypt in the third century BC. Ancient Egyptians traditionally decorated and painted sarcophagi in which they were buried—the best-known example is the sarcophagus of Tutankhamen. This tradition was continued during the Hellenic period into the third century AD. Many striking examples of these portraits, primarily of Greek residents of Egypt, have been found in graves. These encaustic paintings (made with hot pigmented wax on wooden panels) are known as the Fayum mummy portraits; many of them bear a striking resemblance to later Coptic icons with their large eyes and face-on portraits painted in an almost two-dimensional style.

The seventh century saw a movement in the Coptic Church to eliminate icons from churches on the grounds that they were being worshipped as graven images. No doubt the invasion of Egypt by the Arabs, bringing Islam to the area, also had an influence in this movement.

In the eighteenth century, however, Coptic icons reappeared. These new images were marked by a simplification of form, the use of flat colors, and the bold delineation that is now seen as Coptic in character. To this day, Coptic icons often follow a certain symbolic forms:

- Large, wide eyes symbolizing the spiritual eye that looks beyond material needs.

- Large ears listen to the word of God.
- Gentle lips to glorify and praise the Lord.
- Small mouths, so that they cannot be the source of empty or harmful words.
- Small noses, because the nose is sometimes seen as sensual.
- Large heads, implying that the figure is devoted to contemplation and prayer.¹

In the mid-twentieth century, there was a renaissance in Coptic art and culture. Dr. Isaac Fanous, a Coptic Christian artist, was foremost in advancing this movement. He taught at the Institute of Coptic Studies in Alexandria, where he founded a program to teach these artistic traditions. In addition, he developed his own style of iconic art, which drew heavily on the historic style of Coptic icons but has a flatter and at times almost abstract feel and appearance.

Adel Nassief is a graduate of Dr. Fanous's program. His creation of the images for *First Christmas* followed the traditional Coptic artistic approach. The paintings were created on wood panels initially prepared with several coats of gesso. The planned image was drawn on the panel with pencil. The colors were then painted using tempura paint, lighter first and moving to darker colors. Gold leaf was added—a difficult process requiring much patience. Finally, the painting was coated with a clear sealer.

In the iconic (not just Coptic) tradition, the creation of an icon is described as a process of “writing” the icon rather

than painting it. The writing of the icon is seen as a spiritual experience requiring prayer and contemplation. Often artists will start their writing with a prayer to the individual being portrayed. Throughout the writing there is prayer and meditation—essential parts of the creative process. It is not just an artistic but also a spiritual creation.

When you look at Adel Nassief's work for *First Christmas*, you can't help but be drawn to his icons. There is a genuineness about them that places you firmly in the time and place of the events. By drawing on the ancient and spiritual traditions of his art, Adel has created images that touch our hearts. In the process, they give us a better understanding of the extraordinary events that transpired in the small town of Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago.



¹ Dr. Zacharia Wahba outlines the symbolism of Coptic Icons in his online article, “The Coptic Icons: Their History & Spiritual Significance,” http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/7261/coptic_icons.htm

II

The “Writing” of *First Christmas*

Almost twenty-five years ago, author Alastair Macdonald went looking for a picture book telling the story of the birth of Jesus Christ to read to his children. Not finding exactly what he wanted, he decided to tell the story in his own words. “I wanted to create a story,” says Macdonald, “that would become a family tradition that parents could share with their children every Christmas; a story that would help to bring Christ back into Christmas.”

Macdonald decided to tell the story from the unique perspective of Zeke, Joseph’s trusty and hardworking donkey and wrote the story in anapestic tetrameter—the same upbeat rhythm used in “The Night Before Christmas” and much of the poetry of Dr. Seuss.

First Christmas is vividly illustrated by Adel Nassief, an accomplished Coptic Christian artist who lives and works in Alexandria, Egypt. Nassief and Macdonald collaborated for three years on the creation of the icons illustrating *First Christmas*. The paintings were done in the traditional manner, on wood board with tempura paint and gold leaf. In the Coptic Christian tradition, icons are described as being “written” instead of painted because their creation requires prayer and spiritual consideration as well as artistic effort. Nassief’s twenty-one paintings bring the story to life as never before, giving Zeke’s poetic narrative both depth and dignity.

Although it has taken almost twenty-five years to get *First*

Christmas completed and published, its creation has been marked by many moments of serendipity and grace. As Macdonald indicates, “This is a project that just wouldn’t go away. It has been touched in so many ways with divine intervention. How else can you explain that the poem could be written by a man who had never written poetry; an Egyptian artist would be found to interpret the poem with beauty, grace and spirituality; and finally Welcome Books, probably one of the most distinctive publishers of illustrated books in North America, would agree to publish it? It has truly been a project of continuing great blessings.”

Alastair Macdonald and his wife live in Bermuda and, although their children are now grown, they look forward to the day when they can read *First Christmas* to their grandchildren.

Adel Nassief lives with his family in Alexandria, Egypt. He is frequently commissioned to create large murals and mosaics for Coptic Christian churches around the world. More of his work can be seen at www.adelnassief.net.

To learn more about *First Christmas*, please go to www.firstchristmas.net.



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FIRST CHRISTMAS



ALASTAIR MACDONALD

Illustrations by Adel Nassief

The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is told here in *First Christmas* by Zeke, Joseph's faithful and hardworking donkey. Zeke spins his tale in playful verse, telling of the events that lead up to the wondrous moment of the birth of baby Jesus. As he tells us at the end of his story:

'Twas a night to remember, I'll never forget,
When Jesus, the Christ child, and I first met.

The story is beautifully illustrated by Adel Nassief, an accomplished Christian Coptic artist who lives and works in Alexandria, Egypt. His work, twenty-one paintings in the style of Coptic icons, brings alive the story as never before, giving Zeke's poetic narrative both depth and dignity.

First Christmas will delight adults and children alike. It is the perfect story for families to share each Christmas; the perfect story to read to children before they go to bed on Christmas Eve; the perfect story to remind us all of the real meaning of Christmas. Despite all the hustle and bustle of Christmas, *First Christmas* tells us of that very special time, more than two thousand years ago, when the birth of a baby in a lowly stable brought new hope and, in the process, changed our world forever. Beautifully printed with a fifth-color gold throughout and with a cloth case featuring a hand-tipped image and foil stamping, *First Christmas* is destined to become an instant Christmas classic.

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