

Jesus Without The Miracles

Thomas Jefferson's Bible and the Gospel of Thomas

by

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Back when the WHAT WOULD JESUS DO bracelets were appearing on the wrists of young people all around the country, I found myself in an argument with an old friend, a fellow Virginian who, like me, is the lapsed son of a Baptist preacher. We had both fallen pretty far, far enough to spend many nights together in the local Irish pub, putting away Guinness and commiserating about how the Church had crippled our spirits and misunderstood our complicated souls. The crux of our argument was over the bracelets' merit and utility. My friend saw them as just another example of hollow piety. For my part, I said it would indeed be a positive step if Christians actually began to follow the teachings of the founder.

Something similar was no doubt on the mind of another Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, when he took a pair of scissors to the King James Bible two hundred years ago. Jefferson cut out the virgin birth, all the miracles—including the most important one, the Resurrection—then pasted together what was left and called it *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth* (fifteen years later, in retirement at Monticello, he expanded the text, added French,

Latin, and Greek translations, and called it *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*). In an 1819 letter to William Short, Jefferson recollected that the cut-and-paste job was the work of two or three nights only, at Washington, after getting through the evening task of reading the letters and papers of the day." Jefferson mentioned *The Philosophy of Jesus* in a few other personal letters, but for the most part he kept the whole matter private, probably guessing that the established Church would see the compilation as one more example of his "atheism." Nor did

Jefferson care to give Federalist newspapers another reason to remind him of alleged sexual relations with his slave Sally Herrings, an entanglement certainly out of keeping with the philosophy of Jesus.

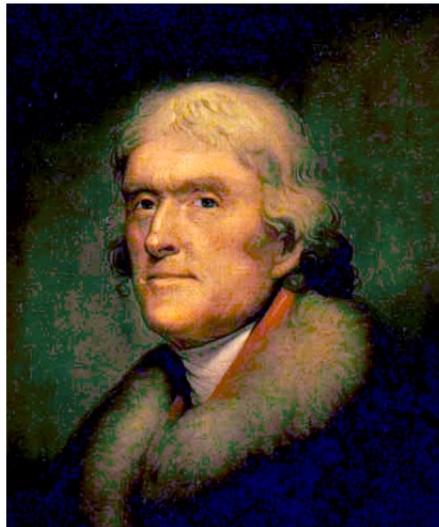
But Jefferson's severe redaction was probably a retaliatory act, as much as anything, against priests and ministers—"soothsayers and necromancers," Jefferson called them—who had unleashed attacks on his character during the acrimonious presidential election

of 1800. Jefferson believed that an authentic Christianity had long ago been hijacked by the Christian Church. The teachings of its founder



had become so distorted as to make “one half of the world fools, and the other half hypocrites.” Jefferson would no doubt have agreed with Tolstoy that the Christian Church had supplanted the Sermon on the Mount with the Nicene Creed to create a system of beliefs that Jesus himself wouldn’t have recognized, much less laid claim to. “I abuse the priests, indeed,” Jefferson wrote to Charles Clay in 1815, “who have so much abused the pure and holy doctrines of their Master.” By stripping away the gospels’ claim that Jesus was the divine son of God, and by stripping away the subsequent miracles they invented to prove it, Jefferson boasted that he had extracted the “diamonds from the dunghill” to reveal the true teaching of Jesus for what it was: “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”

Up until that point, Jefferson had claimed Epicurus as his patron-philosopher. Two thousand years earlier, Epicurus had taught that life would be much easier to endure if we stopped fearing God and death—about which we can know and do nothing—and followed instead a program of prudent self-sufficiency. “Everything easy to procure is natural,” Epicurus wrote, “while everything difficult to obtain is superfluous.” Such a philosophy certainly would have appealed to Jefferson’s agrarian vision for the new American nation. But after suffering the personal attacks of the 1800 campaign, Jefferson discovered that the philosophy of Epicurus didn’t go far enough. “Epictetus and Epicurus give laws for governing ourselves,” Jefferson wrote to William Short, “Jesus a supplement of the duties and charities we owe to others.” Jefferson no doubt felt that not a few people owed him some charity.



Jefferson’s tombstone at Monticello does not remind visitors that the deceased was once president of the United States. Rather it states that Jefferson authored the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. So it was fitting that in 1904 the Government Printing Office published 5,000 handsome, leather-bound copies of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* for the first time, one hundred years after Jefferson pasted it together.

To read the Gospel story—the “good news”—through Jefferson’s lens is instructive in a number of ways, the least of which is its representation of Jesus’ “life.” Many New Testament scholars agree that the infancy narratives of Matthew and

Luke are pure myth. And no one has solved the mystery of the “missing years”—the two decades between when Jesus supposedly taught in the temple as a precocious child and when he came ambling along the Jordan river, asking to be baptized by the fiery zealot, John the Baptist. From then until his execution a few years later, Jesus’ life was a combination of walking, eating with followers and social outcasts, preaching, fishing a

little, telling stories that no one seemed to understand, and offering largely unsolicited diatribes against the powers that be. That is to say, the life of Jesus—if unconventional—was nevertheless ordinary enough. Thousands of homeless men and women do pretty much the same thing every day in this country. But to find the historic Jesus within the fabulous accounts of the four Gospel writers is indeed an exercise of looking for diamonds in the compost heap.

Jefferson’s gospel could not solve that problem. Nor did it need to. The life of this itinerant

preacher was much less important to Jefferson than what he taught. Somebody, after all, spoke the Sermon on the Mount, or on the plain, or wherever it was spoken, and somebody told fascinating parables that explained nothing and left everything up to “he who has ears.” What’s more, Jefferson’s objection to the version of Christianity taught in American churches was precisely that it did put so much more emphasis on Jesus’ life and, consequently, his sacrificial death. By excising the Resurrection and Jesus’ claims to divinity from his private gospel, Jefferson portrayed an ordinary man with an extraordinary, though improbable, message.

Indeed, reading Jefferson’s gospel one hundred years after its publication, it’s hard not to become depressed, as did the Rich Young Ruler, about how nearly impossible Jesus’ program would be to follow. To read the Gospel of Matthew or Luke is to be dazzled by one miracle after another. In that context, the actual teachings seem almost mundane. But to read Jefferson’s version (what Beacon Press now publishes as *The Jefferson Bible*) is to face a relentless demand that we be much better people—inside and out—than most of us are. Which leads, as Jefferson must have suspected, to this unfortunate conclusion: the relevance of Christianity to most Americans—then and now—has far more to do with the promise of eternal salvation from this world than with any desire to practice the teachings of Jesus while we are here.

But Jefferson’s gospel also leads to an impressive clarification of what those teachings are. One can make a list, and it need not be long.

- Be just; justice comes from virtue, which comes from the heart.
- Treat people the way we want them to treat us.
- Always work for peaceful resolutions, even

to the point of returning violence with compassion.

- Consider valuable the things that have no material value.
- Do not judge others.
- Do not bear grudges.
- Be modest and unpretentious.
- Give out of true generosity, not because we expect to be repaid.

In all of his teachings, the Jesus that Jefferson recovers has one overarching theme—the world’s values are all upside down in relation to the kingdom of God. Material riches do not constitute real wealth; those whom we think of as the most powerful, the first in the nation-state, are actually the last in the kingdom of God; being true to one’s self is more important than being loyal to one’s family; the Sabbath is for men, men are not for the Sabbath; those who think they know the most are the most ignorant; the natural economy followed by birds and lilies is superior to the economy based on Caesar’s coinage or bankers who charge interest.

Above all, this Jesus cannot abide hypocrites. He has nothing but contempt for men who would kill a woman because of adultery when they themselves have thought about cheating on their wives, or for temple officials who tithe mint and cumin but would do nothing to help a poor woman with a child. “Stop talking about righteousness,” this Jesus is saying, “and be righteous.” It sounds simple. But of course nothing could be more difficult, as Jefferson’s own life illustrates.

In his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), Jefferson urged readers to resist the factory life of large European cities and stay on the land. “Those who labour in the earth are the

chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue,” Jefferson wrote in the famous chapter called “Manufactures.” Farmers intuit the laws of God within the laws of nature, and so become virtuous, he reasoned. They are, by the nature of their work, resourceful, neighborly, independent. They are the elemental caretakers of the world. Nor do they succumb to the crude opinions of the masses. But the farmer is free-thinking and inquisitive. The manufacturer, by contrast, is a specialist, a cog, a wage slave. “Dependence,” Jefferson concluded, “begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.” A manufacturer cannot be a citizen of a democracy, only a consumer within an oligarchy.

Four years later, Hamilton submitted to Congress his Report on Manufactures, in which he dismissed Jefferson’s agrarian vision in favor of developing industry, division of labor, child labor, protective tariffs, and prohibitions on many imported manufactured goods. Today, fewer than 1 percent of Americans work on farms, and many of those are huge, industrial farms that generate massive amounts of toxic by-products. That Jefferson’s self-reliant farmer is so unrecognizable to us today is evidence enough, should we need any, that we have inherited Hamilton’s America, not Jefferson’s.

The difference between Jefferson and Hamilton is the difference between a version of Christianity based on Jesus’ life and death and Resurrection, and one based on his teachings. Or to put it another way, it is a difference between where one locates *basileia tou theou*—the kingdom of God. Is it, as Luke’s gospel says, “in the midst of you” (17:21), or is it, as John’s gospel claimed, a reward saved for the sweet hereafter? To live by Jesus’ teachings would be to live virtuously as stewards of the land; it would be to create an economy based on compassion, cooperation,

and conservation; it would be to preserve the Creation as the kingdom of God. Jefferson was proposing a country of countrysides, a pastorate in which we would want to live; Hamilton was giving us a nation of factories from which we would want—perhaps in the end need—to be saved.

Thomas is the Aramaic word for twin. That Thomas Jefferson’s version of Christianity actually found a twin gospel—one that included no miracles, no claims of divinity, but only the teachings of Jesus—hidden beneath an Egyptian cliff, and that this ancient gospel was also recorded by a man known as Thomas, makes for a remarkable story.

Sometime near the end of the nineteenth century, two British archaeologists, Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, were searching through an ancient trash heap along the Nile River, at a site known as Oxyrhynchus, when they found three small papyrus leaves. One of the fragments read, “These are the [] sayings [] the living Jesus spoke [] also called Thomas [].” New Testament scholars had long known that there once existed a Gospel of Thomas because in the third century Hippolytus denounced such a text in his *Refutation of All Heresies*. And because Thomas’s gospel ran afoul of the early Church bishops, particularly Irenaeus, most copies of it were likely destroyed.

In 1945, 150 miles upstream near another river town called Nag Hammadi, an Egyptian farmer named Muhammad `Ali al-Samman was guiding his camel beneath the nitrogen-rich cliffs that line the Nile, collecting fertilizer for his fields. As he dug at the base of one cliff, Muhammad `Ali found a sealed jug, obviously ancient. Fearing a jinn but hoping for gold, he broke the jar open with his mattock. He found neither. What fell out were twelve books (codices), made from papyrus and bound in leather. Figuring the manuscripts might be worth something, Muhammad

`Ali gathered them up in his turban and carried them home. According to New Testament scholar James M. Robinson, who has pieced this whole story together, Muhammad `Ali's mother used some of the leaves from the books to ignite their out-door clay oven. Muhammad `Ali traded others for oranges and cigarettes.

Meanwhile, shortly after the discovery, Muhammad `Ali and his brothers hacked to death a man they claimed had killed their father six months earlier. But when local police started poking around, asking about the murder, Muhammad `Ali didn't want to answer any further questions about the codices. Since the manuscripts were written in Coptic, an Egyptian variant of Greek, he hid one at the house of a Coptic priest. The priest, in turn, sent it to Cairo by way of his brother-in-law to ascertain its value on the antiquities market. But someone tipped off Egyptian authorities, who then threatened to take the brother-in-law into custody and told him he could return home only if he sold the codex to the Coptic Museum, which he promptly did.

Here a one-eyed bandit named Bahij `Ali enters the story. Cairo's leading antiquities dealer, Cypriot Phocion J. Tano, had retained Bahij `Ali to acquire as many of the codices as possible. But again, the Egyptian government heard about Tano's acquisitions and pressed him to entrust the manuscripts to the Coptic Museum for "safe keeping." Tano spent much of the 1950s trying unsuccessfully to get the codices back.

In 1952 the French scholar Henri-Charles Puech realized that a tractate in Codex II contained sayings that matched the Oxyrhynchus fragments. Less than sixty years after Grenfell and Hunt uncovered hard evidence that a Gospel of Thomas did at one time exist, Puech was able to conclude that the entire text had been found.

When all of the remaining codices were accounted for, there turned out to be fifty-two separate

tractates hidden at Nag Hammadi. How did they end up in this remote port town? In 325 C.E. the Roman Emperor Constantine, newly converted to Christianity, called for a conference of bishops in Nicaea. He charged them to come up with a short document that would unite Christians and eradicate heresy. The result was the Nicene Creed. Forty-two years later, one of the drafters, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, issued a letter to Egyptian monks calling for all heretical manuscripts to be destroyed.¹ Scholars suspect that monks at the St. Pachomius monastery, near Nag Hammadi, refused the order, and instead buried the codices in a large jug.

Unfortunately, years of infighting among international scholars stalled the publication of what came to be called the Nag Hammadi library, and the European countries that controlled the publication rights showed a remarkable indifference to the task. In the end it was an American, James M. Robinson, who obtained photographs of the individual Coptic tractates and passed them on to a team of American translators. As a result, the first complete edition of the Nag Hammadi Library was published in English.

Perhaps because of this head start, much of the ground-breaking scholarship devoted to the Gospel of Thomas has come from Americans: Robinson himself, Stephen J. Patterson, John Dominic Crossan, Helmut Koester, Stevan Davies, and Elaine Pagels. But I have another theory: it was Thomas Jefferson's *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* that prepared the Americans for what they would find in the ancient Gospel of Thomas. In some Borgesian way, Jefferson's gospel has become a predecessor to the Gospel of Thomas, though it was composed some 1,700 years later.

The similarities between the two gospels are remarkable, as much for what they do not say as for what they do. Like Jefferson's gospel, Thomas's ignores the virgin birth. Thomas's Jesus never

performs a miracle, never calls himself the Son of God, and never claims that he will have to die for the sins of humankind. Instead he tells parables, he issues instructions, and, most alarmingly, he locates the kingdom of God in that one place we might never look—right in front of us.

On the topics of sin, sacrifice, and salvation—the real Trinity of mainline Christianity—Thomas’s Jesus, like Jefferson’s, is silent. In fact, what we find in the Gospel of Thomas is not really Christianity at all. There is no attempt in the Gospel of Thomas to tell the “story” of Jesus, and there certainly is no inkling of some impending Day of Judgment. Instead, Thomas offers a collection of 114 “sayings” that Jesus is remembered to have delivered in the presence of his followers and before anonymous crowds. These were compiled under the name of Thomas and were circulated throughout Syria among a group that scholars now call the Jesus movement.

As a literary type, the Gospel of Thomas bears kinship with the “wisdom literature” of late Judaism, such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Wisdom of Solomon. But its closest counterpart is the sayings gospel Q (after the German *Quelle*: “source”), from which Matthew and Luke took much of their material. Many of the sayings in Thomas’s gospel also appear in Q; almost half of the sayings in Thomas would be familiar to any reader of the New Testament. Such collections circulated around Hellenistic Palestine simply because they contained advice people wanted to remember. The advice in the Gospel of Thomas—like that in Jefferson’s gospel—is extreme, however, so much so that Stephen J. Patterson has labeled it “counter-cultural wisdom.”

This Jesus is especially hard on the rich. As in the canonical Gospels, he says that a man cannot serve two masters and that the poor will be the first to find the kingdom of God. He warns against lending with interest. He tells the parable of the rich man whose friends were too preoc-

cupied to come to dinner, and so he sent his servants out to “bring back whomever you find.”

But unlike Matthew and Luke, Thomas ends his story with this damning line: “Buyers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my father.”

This Jesus also has no time for empty ceremony, such as fasting and praying. Nor is he too concerned about sins of the flesh. “Why do you wash the outside of the cup?” he asks. “Do you not understand that the one who made the inside is also the one who made the outside?” On the subject of circumcision, he points out, quite sensibly it seems to me, “If [circumcision] were useful, children’s fathers would produce them already circumcised from their mothers.” At one point he tells his followers that when they “strip with-out being ashamed,” then they will be ready for the kingdom of God. The word “sin” occurs only once in the Gospel of Thomas.

As in the canonical Gospels, this Jesus urges his listeners to abandon their families and follow him. In Thomas this charge takes the form of the succinct advice: “Be passers by.” It’s a phrase one might expect to find in the *Tao Te Ching*. Indeed, many scholars have noted the “eastern” feel of Thomas’s gospel. Edward Conze has even suggested that the Thomas Christians intermingled with Buddhists in southern India. I suspect it is the spirit of “nonattachment” in Thomas that seems so Taoist or Buddhist. It isn’t a concept American Christians have ever been too comfortable with, but it is the crux of Thomas’s gospel. His Jesus is trying to convince “whoever has ears” to shake off all of the world’s distractions and encumbrances so they might finally see something real. It is the same impulse that drove Henry Thoreau out to Walden Pond.

But what is it exactly they are supposed to see? A radically revised version of the kingdom of God. Throughout the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus’ followers are clearly preoccupied with John the

Baptist's vision of an impending apocalypse, at which time the Ultimate Arbiter will hear all grievances and right all wrongs. But in Thomas, Jesus openly ridicules such divine intervention or the promise of heavenly compensation for worldly injustice. In the third saying we read: "Jesus said, 'If your leaders say to you, "Look, the kingdom is in heaven," then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, "It is in the sea," then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you.'" We recognize in that last phrase a variant of Luke 17:21. But scholars have puzzled over whether Luke's Greek should be translated as "the kingdom of God is within you" or "the kingdom of God is in your midst." Thomas leaves no doubt. In his gospel's penultimate saying, when the followers ask yet again when the kingdom will come, Jesus replies, "the father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."

When Jesus' followers ask when they will enter the kingdom of God, he replies, "When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one . . . then you will enter [the kingdom]." This idea of making two into one is central to the theology of Thomas. Unlike Paul's lawgiver and eternal redeemer, this Jesus rejects the verbal and psychological dualisms that divide the world into good and evil, black and white, heaven and hell, body and soul, male and female, straight and gay. Like Zen Buddhists, Thomas's Jesus believes that to divide the world up into abstract categories is to miss seeing the world as it is. At one point Jesus tells his followers, "On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?" When we come into being, Jesus seems to be saying, we are necessarily separated from the Creator, the One. What then? Jesus' question implies that we must rediscover the one, not by a return to some heavenly realm

but by recognizing the world before us as an emanation of that One—an immanent wholeness, a kingdom of God.

This Jesus is obviously no savior, certainly no messiah, which alone would account for why early bishops would have ordered the Gospel of Thomas destroyed. But beyond that, they must have realized that while this teaching might serve the cause of the Jesus movement, an itinerant group of passers-by, it would never do as the basis for an established church. Unlike the Jesus of John's gospel, this arresting figure does not glory in his own divinity or brood over his sacrificial fate to save mankind. You can save yourself, he tells the crowds: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you [will] kill you." What everyone has within is some fragment of divine light. That spark is proof of our kinship to the Creator—of our own divinity. But human vanities blind us to it. We walk around wearing all sorts of lampshades until we finally convince ourselves that such a light never existed at all. The Jesus of Thomas's gospel is simply trying to give us back something we already possess. Here is a crucial passage:

Jesus said, "Images are visible to people, but the light within them is hidden in the image of the father's light. He will be disclosed, but his image is hidden by his light."

Jesus said, "When you see your likeness, you are happy. But when you see your images that came into being before you and that neither die nor become visible, how much you will bear!"

There is an empirical way of knowing, and there is an intuitive way of understanding. The "father's light" exists within everyone and "will be disclosed," but we cannot know it intellectually—we cannot give it an image. Likewise, we comprise two selves—the one we see in the mir-

ror, and the face we had before we were born. This last paradoxical image exists in nearly all mystical literature—Zen koans, the Kabbalah, the Upanishads—and here, in the Gospel of Thomas. To “see” this imageless image, to know this original self, is to arrive at a nexus where the light within illuminates the world without, and finally shows it for what it truly is—the kingdom of God. For that reason, the kingdom must exist simultaneously within and without. When Jesus’ followers ask him to show them “where you are, for we must seek it,” Jesus replies, “There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world.

The intuitive mysticism of the Gospel of Thomas would have made Thomas Jefferson nervous. He was a rationalist, a child of the Enlightenment, a student of Locke and Newton. But twelve years after Jefferson’s death, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered the commencement address to the graduating class of Harvard’s Divinity School, a speech that mightily upset many in his audience. If we set “The Divinity School Address” beside Jefferson’s gospel, we can begin to understand how the sayings collected by Thomas present us with an oddly but uniquely American gospel.

Emerson shared Jefferson’s concern that “historical Christianity” had muddled the message of its founder. But whereas Jefferson worked to retrieve the ethical teachings of Jesus, Emerson was mining the Gospels for something far more elusive—the mystery of the soul.” Standing before the small group of graduates on a summer night in 1838, Emerson advised the young ministers to renounce preaching the “tropes” of the Gospels and instead point their parishoners back toward their own “divine nature.” The problem with the established Church, Emerson charged, is that it teaches our smallness instead of our largeness. “In how many churches,” he asked, “by how many prophets, tell me, is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the

earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God?” Emerson, with breathtaking sweep, was replacing American Puritanism with transcendentalism, replacing the Church’s emphasis on sin with the individual’s concern for his or her own soul. Jesus, he said, was ravished by the soul’s beauty—“he lived in it, and had his being there.” He had climbed to the fountainhead, the fundamental intuition. “One man was true to what is in you and me,” Emerson concluded. “He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World.” Emerson did not, like Jefferson, deny Jesus’ divinity; he simply said the same potential resides in every human heart. He was offering, without knowing it, the first American commentary on the Gospel of Thomas.

Because the of Gospel of Thomas presents a portrait of Jesus so at odds with the canonical Gospels, if one wants to argue, as I do, for the primacy of this version of Christianity, then one must date Thomas closer to its source—the talking Jesus—than any of the other four Gospels.

I am not a New Testament scholar. All I can bring to this debate is eighteen years of compulsory churchgoing and a master’s degree in reading literary texts. But I am convinced by Stephen J. Patterson’s claim that there is no pattern of dependence to suggest the Gospel of Thomas borrowed from Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Furthermore, there are, in Thomas, none of the “secondary accretions” found in the synoptic texts. The four canonical Gospel writers allegorize extensively, but Thomas almost always lets the sayings and parables stand, as Patterson says, “in forms that are more primitive than their synoptic parallels.” For instance, Jesus’ well-known remark about the impossibility of serving two masters stands alone in both Thomas and in the other sayings gospel, Q. Luke, however, who would have borrowed it from Q, positions this

saying within his narrative to function as a direct attack on the Pharisees. But the compilers of the two sayings gospels presumably knew the context, and saw no reason to replicate it, nor did they try to distort it to fit their own purposes. Later, Matthew and Luke combined information from Q and Mark's gospel to invent their own narratives. But given the Gospel of Thomas's resemblance to Q as well as its independence from the canonical Gospels, there is good reason to believe, as does Helmut Koester of Harvard Divinity School, that it is older than the Gospel of Mark.

One question remains: who was Thomas, the author of this ancient collection of sayings? Was it the same Thomas who, in John's gospel, doubted that Jesus had risen from the grave until he saw the scars on his hands? John claims to be "the beloved" of Jesus; Thomas claims to be his "twin." Indeed, John himself makes three references to Thomas, "called the twin." Whether this is the same Judas Thomas, whom Mark and Matthew mention as the brother of Jesus—and whether he really was Jesus' twin brother—are questions that still keep scholars busy.

Trying to attribute authorship to ancient religious documents is a nearly hopeless task; too much mythologizing has gotten in the way. But in her most recent book, *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels argues that the author of this gospel is indeed the same Doubting Thomas who, significantly, appears as a doubter only in John's gospel. Pagels argues that these two inheritors of Jesus' teaching had reached profoundly irreconcilable understandings of that message, particularly with regard to the kingdom of God. John's Jesus is a divine savior, on his way to prepare a better place for those who believe in his redeeming power. Thomas's Jesus, as we have seen, is just the opposite. Pagels suggests that John actually preached his gospel to refute Thomas's teachings, which would explain why only John's gospel depicts Thomas in a poor light.

In the end, of course, John's savior Jesus, who could forgive sins and assuage our fear of death by promising an eternal afterlife, proved more attractive to the early Christians than Thomas's wandering mystic who called for voluntary poverty and spoke in maddening paradoxes. But along with John's "good news" comes the not-so-good news that we are all guilty, sinners by birth, consigned to serve out our sentence in this toilsome, fallen world.

I have spent exactly half my life sitting in churches, listening to preachers enumerate my many sins and declare my inherent deficiency in the eyes of God. My father, however, was never one of those ministers.

He shot himself with his hunting rifle before I was ever old enough to sit with my mother in his congregation. I do not lay all of my father's problems on the steps of the Church, but I do believe it bears much of the blame. My father was also the son of a Baptist minister. My grandfather was a country preacher who, every Sunday, delivered a simple message about earthly hardships, mortal sin, and the crucial choice between eternal salvation or damnation. The atmosphere of guilt was so pervasive within my grandfather's fundamentalism that one didn't even have to do anything wrong. We were born with the mark of sin. Just being alive, just waking up in the morning became a dubious endeavor, a transgression of the flesh. For someone like my father, who was already given to long stretches of depression, such a psychological burden must have finally become unbearable.

I've come to see that disbelief, unlike the Christian "conversion experience," is not a cataclysmic event. I can't say exactly when I lost my family's faith in a redeeming messiah. But I do know that at some point during one of my own lengthy bouts of depression and self-loathing, I decided, however unconsciously, that I could

best avoid my father's fate by abandoning my grandfather's beliefs. Of course losing faith is never that simple, and in my case it involved bitter recriminations and long, terrible silences between me and the rest of my family. When my grandfather died last year, we were barely speaking. And, of course, the problem with losing faith is that you never really do, not completely. You never quite shake off that internal surveillance mechanism that William Blake called the "mind-forg'd manacles" and Freud later termed the superego.

So when I first discovered the Gospel of Thomas about a decade ago, I was shocked to find a version of Christianity that I could accept and one that, moreover, could serve as a vital corrective to my grandfather's view that we live helplessly, sinfully, in a broken world. According to Thomas's Jesus, humankind never suffered an irredeemable Fall. The world only appears to be a realm of separation from the Creator and from one another. When Thomas's Jesus tells his followers that "Adam came from great power and great wealth, but he was not worthy of you," he is implying that Adam's first sin was to take on the knowledge of good and evil—the knowledge that continues to divide the world into us and them. The stunning message of Thomas's gospel is that such divisions are arbitrary, destructive, and, finally, unnatural. Only the talking animals believe in them. Thus Adam's sin, ironically, was simply ignorance. True, that ignorance proved to be congenital, but it wasn't terminal and it didn't demand divine intervention. What it demanded was a realization on the part of each individual that he or she still possesses a divine light lodged within the heart, and that light can reveal the world to be a beautiful, undivided wholeness.

This teacher of reconciliation was the same Jesus whom Thomas Jefferson hoped to recover through his own gospel project. And whereas Jefferson found in Jesus' teaching an ethic for how we should treat others, Emerson found in

it an alchemical light that transforms flesh into spirit. In some uncanny trick of history and geography, the ancient Gospel of Thomas combines these two visions of Jesus to give us what I would call a truly American gospel. By pulling the kingdom of God out of the sky and transposing it onto this world, Thomas's Jesus returns us, in effect, to Jefferson's agrarian America, where the farmer intuits the laws of God through the laws of nature.

Read together, as the world all around us sickens and dies from the poison discharges of Hamiltonian industry, these twin gospels suggest that it is time we inverted Pascal's famous wager to say not that we should believe in heaven because we have nothing to lose but rather that we should believe first in this world, because in losing it we may lose everything. And if we can somehow live justly, modestly, with generosity and compassion, we have everything to gain. Perhaps we do not have to wait for the kingdom of God.

NOTES

1 Athanasius's letter is the first known list of the twenty-seven books that now make up the New Testament.

2 "Jesus said to them, 'If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits.'"

Erik Reece's last article for Harper's Magazine, "Death of a Mountain," appeared in the April issue. His new book, *Lost Mountain*, will be published by Riverhead in February.

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