## Stones into Bread

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  THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE SON, by Norman Mailer. 243 pp. Random House, 1997.

The Bible is like a once-fearsome lion that, now toothless and declawed, can be petted and teased. The allegedly sacred text has become a toy for scholars and poets; on my shelves alone sit, among volumes recently received, versified, closer-to-the-Hebraic versions of Genesis and Exodus (by Everett Fox) and the Song of Solomon (by Ariel and Chana Bloch). Seven years ago David Rosenberg—in his own words—“restored and translated a lost version of the Hebrew Bible” called *The Book of J*, which he and Harold Bloom hypothesize was composed by a woman.\* In *The Lost Book of Paradise* (1993) he gives us an even more hypothetical reconstruction, whose original—of which traces allegedly exist in the Song of Solomon—is lost or else “placed under a taboo of forgetfulness.” It begins

with Adam saying, in the centered lines so popular since the advent of the computer: If I spoke to her in breaths lips inspire lips to press to drink there as all words swallowed like seeds by the earth to rest there, pregnant for the namer as I for you, each naming like your kiss, a pressing claim to memory ...

Well, maybe so, though the sensibility behind this Ur-text seems twentieth-century valentine. Elsewhere, to appease modern gender-sensitivity, “inclusive-language” versions of the Bible are promulgated, with God turned into a He-She. Even in contemporary Christian church services, the masculine pronouns of the resolutely patriarchal Bible are freely neutered: “worthy of all men to be received” in Timothy 1:15 commonly drops the “men,” and “If any man sin” in 1 John 2:1 becomes “if any one sin.” Unchained by Luther from the lectern and from Latin, the Good Book is open to tweakings by modern novelists from Kazantzakis to Lagerkvist. Just last year, Walter Wangerin, Jr., published the 850-page retelling, *The Book of God: The Bible as a Novel*. The novelist Reynolds Price has put himself to school with the Gospels’ *koiné* Greek, and essayed new renditions in *A Palpable God* (1978) and *Three Gospels* (1996). In the latter volume he translated Mark and John entire and provided a third entity, an “Apocryphal Gospel,” a synthetic invention of his own. And now Norman Mailer has produced a life of Jesus conceived as an autobiography. One of Mailer’s irrepressible strengths has been his ability to become interested, and then quickly expert, in almost anything. Ancient Egyptians, the CIA, Lee Harvey Oswald, Pablo Picasso, astronauts, prize-fighters, sex, politics—all have stimulated his organs of verbalization. Still, a retelling of the Gospels from Jesus’s point of view may find even Mailer’s nimblest admirers off balance. He came to it, he told an interviewer for the Random House magazine, *At Random*, by way of his present wife, who was reared as a Free Will Baptist in Arkansas. On visits to her native small town, he would accompany his father-in-law to an adult Bible class, where, as a Jew, he was regarded as a rarity and “approached with the most curious kind of respect”: he was invited to shed light on New Testament passages puzzling to these hard-shell Christians. Reading the Gospels for himself, he found them in part remarkable but, “Where you don’t have a wonderful sentence, what you get is some pretty dull prose and a contradictory, almost hopeless way of telling the story. So I thought this account, this wonderful narrative, ought to be properly told.” Who better to do it—to repair the botch perpetrated by the literary committees of early Christians—than Norman Mailer? He said to himself, “If I can write about Isis and Osiris and Ra, then certainly the New Testament is not going to be that difficult to do.” And he wasn’t half wrong. His gospel is written in a direct, rather relaxed English that yet has an eerie, neo-Biblical dignity. Some of the sentences may be a bit too simple (“We were eating with much joy”; “He left the porch. He was weeping. He wept”) and some not simple enough (“Tears stood forth in my eyes like sentinels on guard”) but the tone as a whole is quietly penetrating. Where the serene ghostly voice of Jesus is coming from is perhaps a question better left alone, but Mailer tackles it at the outset: after complaining of the exaggerations and inaccuracies in the Gospel accounts, “written many years after I was gone,” Jesus tells the reader, “So I will give my own account. For those who would ask how my words have come to this page, I would tell them to look upon it as a small miracle.” Jesus is setting the record straight, although he\* is hopeful rather than certain that he can do it: “I would hope to remain closer to the truth” than Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, who were all “seeking to enlarge their fold,” some appealing to Gentiles, some to Jews. Mailer’s synoptic gospel runs to 242 well-leaded pages, which is not much shorter than the four canonical Gospels altogether in such modern translations as those by E. V. Rieu and Richmond Lattimore. It is almost five times longer than the “Apocryphal Gospel” by Price, and makes a stronger impression; Price took a glancing, minimalist approach, interposing into the traditional narrative a few poetic details—a post-Resurrection appearance to Judas, a post—Last Supper dance, some Freudian touches in the forty days in the wilderness. A number of Price’s extra flourishes were added from the apocryphal, non-canonical Gospels ascribed to Thomas and James. Mailer is surprisingly submissive to the canonical material; his additions and emphases derive not from esoteric texts but from a personal fictive reshaping. His Jesus is very much a carpenter, whose fourteen years of apprenticeship to Joseph are lovingly described; his effort “to find communion with the wood” informs his ministry metaphorically and extends to his being offended, in his last hours, by the crude carpentry of the cross, “nailed together with slovenly blows of the hammer.” He and his family are Essenes—the white-clad, strictly observant Jewish sect usually congregated in groups of celibate men. The celibacy does not prevent Joseph from fathering four brothers of Jesus, but it does settle the issue much vexed by modern explorers of the Savior’s life: the extent of his sexual activity. This Jesus has some “lustful thoughts” in the night, but God reinforces his chastity by pointing out the faith-weakening effects upon Solomon of his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. The Devil in the wilderness accuses God the Father of being secretly in love with Jezebel, and Jesus’s later encounter with Mary Magdalene is given a heated treatment. While a virtual anthology of Biblical erotica tumbles through his head, Jesus manages to keep the harlot in proportion: “By half she was gentle, and that half belonged to God.” Rather daringly, Mailer combines in one discourse Jesus’s two best-known, widely disparate pronouncements on lust: the tolerant admonition, in John, that “he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone” at a woman taken in adultery, and his harsh pronouncement, in Matthew (inspiring many a self-castration), that “it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.” The lustful can find forgiveness or damnation in the Gospels, depending on where they look; either the Gospel writers were of differing minds, or Jesus himself was, humanly enough. Mailer’s macho sense of *virtus*, of virtue as a kind of physical fluid, works well with the many incidents of Jesus’s healing. In the *At Random* interview Mailer speaks of himself as being, in his celebrity, “half a man and half something else”; this sense of one man inside another becomes affecting as Jesus, still doubtful of his powers and his mission, haltingly lets God’s power flow through him. Some miracles are rationalized: that of the loaves and the fishes is explained as the breaking of the available bread and dried fish into “exceedingly small” pieces. Jesus’s first miracle, turning the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, is oddly reconstructed; whereas in the Bible his mother urges him to perform it, receiving the rebuke “Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come,” in Mailer he doesn’t tell her anything but silently transforms the barrels of water by eating a single red grape with “much contemplation of the Spirit who resided within.” The miracle-worker’s strength repeatedly ebbs to lethargy as he copes with the world’s endless supply of suffering. The acts of healing are strenuous, and by no means assured of success; accosted in Jerusalem by a man blind from birth, Jesus is almost comically dismayed: When I looked at the eyes of this blind man, however, I saw nothing with which to begin, not even a sightless eye on either side of his nose. There were nothing but two hollows beneath his brow. “I believe,” I said to my Father. “Now help my unbelief.”  With the application of some spittle and clay, he succeeds; but the Phari-sees disbelieve, and beat the former blind man when he insists on the miracle’s reality. The forces of destruction are gathering; a sense of peril, of miracles shakily performed and a mission dimly perceived, has been woven into Mailer’s gospel from the start. The birth of Jesus occasions the slaughter of the innocents and leaves Jesus haunted by the feeling that his true kinship is with “these children and the life they never had.” Mailer’s first-person voice only fitfully convinces us that we are occupying Jesus’s psychological center. To do more would have indeed been a miracle. Any attempt to extend the portrait of the central personality in the overlapping third-person accounts of the New Testament must solve the conundrum of Jesus’s consciousness: was he an omniscient God or a fallible human being groping toward a martyr’s death? Totally omniscient, he would have been engaged in a passionless charade; yet, without some foreknowledge and cosmic intention, he scarcely deserves worship. The early church entertained a wide variety of views—the Docetists maintained that his body had been an apparition; the Adoptionists claimed that he was a mere mortal adopted as the Son of God at his baptism or, even, after his resurrection. The Western, Roman branch of Christianity has favored the human side, Eastern Orthodoxy the more remote, iconic Christ Pantocrator. A settled though explosively inclusive formula was reached in 451, at the Council of Chalcedon, with the phrasing “perfect in deity and perfect in humanity ... in two natures, without being mixed, transmuted, divided or separated.” Four centuries earlier, Paul, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version, beautifully crystallized the mystery in Philippians: “Christ Jesus ... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Without such an emptying, the suffering would not be real, nor the Christian answer to the theological problem of suffering—that God descended to suffer with us—persuasive. It is laid upon each Christian worshipper to exalt a man who confessed to fatigue, who gave way to moods, who on occasion wept, who impulsively withered a fig tree, who founded his church on a pun, who waved away centuries of Judaic observance, who consorted with publicans and tax collectors and women of dubious reputation, who kept asking his disciples who they thought he was, who begged God to relieve him of his coming ordeal, and who on the cross asked God why He had forsaken him. This God, the human being fatally afflicted with a supernatural mission, does walk through this gospel composed by a skeptical, unconverted Jew, whose mother (he told *At Random*) as a girl in New Jersey endured the cat-call of “Christ-killer” from her Irish Catholic schoolmates; she could never understand how her son could have so many Irish friends. The level amiability of *The Gospel According to the Son* is its marvel and perhaps its weakness. Mailer has written an account that, I believe, his Baptist father-in-law can read without discomfort. This is not one of those lives of Jesus (for example, A. N. Wilson’s) that pause to scoff and debate probabilities. The major miracles, including that of the Resurrection, are rolled into the tale; Mailer, whose fiction more than once evokes mystical effluvia, makes himself at home with the Biblical devils, and assigns the Devil himself an extended speaking part. Theologically, Mailer opts for Manichaeanism: his Jesus says, in summary, “God and Mammon still grapple for the hearts of all men and all women. As yet, since the contest remains so equal, neither the Lord nor Satan can triumph.” Manichaeanism is, of course, an age-old heresy, weakening God to make sense of the world’s mixed and woeful condition. Of more individual provenance is Mailer’s equation of Satan and Mammon. No deity, “mammon” is simply the Aramaic word for “riches.” Mailer makes Judas a Sixties radical—a rich kid who has become a militant socialist. “I hate the rich,” he tells Jesus. “They poison all of us. They are vain, undeserving, and wasteful of the hopes of those who are beneath them. They spend their lives lying to the lowly.” Judas becomes a disciple not because he believes the Master’s promises of salvation but because these promises will give the poor courage. Mailer has a narrow basis for this in John 12:3—5. When Jesus accepts the extravagant favor of the anointment with spikenard (his feet in John, his head in Mark and Matthew), it is specifically Judas who protests that the precious perfume should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. In the gospel according to Mailer, after Jesus accepts the luxurious touch with the observation that the poor are with you always, Judas departs and prepares to betray his Master. The moral crux—one’s obligations to the less fortunate versus the value of ceremony and an instinctive, joyous selfishness—is exposed by the modern gospeller but then pragmatically fudged. “Many roads lead to the Lord,” he writes, and, “The truth need last no longer than a shaft of lightning in order to be the mightiest truth of all.” The original Gospels evince a flinty terseness, a refusal, or inability, to provide the close focus and cinematic highlighting that the modern mind expects. In Mark, the moment of crucifixion comes in an introductory clause to a gambling match that nameless Roman soldiers are holding over the confiscated clothes: “And when they had crucified him, they parted his garments, casting lots upon them, what every man should take.” In comparison, medieval and modern depictions seem melodramatic. The crucifixion is cheapened, I think, by Mailer’s added specifics. The pain appears in Technicolor: “Within my skull, light glared at me until I knew the colors of the rainbow; my soul was luminous with pain.” In addition to the seven traditional utterances from the cross, we have this wheedling dialogue, amid metaphorical lava and lightning: I cried out to my Father, “Will You allow not one miracle at this hour?” When my Father replied, it was like a voice from the whirlwind. He said in my ear, and He was louder than my pain: “Would you annul My judgment?” I said: “Not while breath is in me.” But my torment remained. Agony was written on the sky. And pain came down to me like lightning. Pain surged up to me like lava. I prayed again to my Father: “One miracle,” I asked.  Easy enough it is, for a critic, and lazy, to cling to the sacrosanct King James Version and to snub a fresh and in its way fervent rendition of a Biblical narrative. But Mailer, serious as he is, and provocative as some of his shadings are, does not give us what, say, the English writer Jim Crace gives us in his 1997 novel *Quarantine*. There, Jesus’s forty days in the wilderness—an ordeal placed, in the three older Gospels, between his baptism and the start of his ministry—are dramatized with an archaeo-logical command of the texture of life in Herod’s Palestine and with a troubling heterodoxy. Jesus is reconceived as “Gally,” a “boy” besotted with prayer and visions whose program of total deprivation kills him in thirty days; a sextet of other characters—four religious pilgrims, a stranded merchant, and his wife—radically transform the terms of the traditional account, including the person of Satan. Such an assaultive retelling, far from smoothing the rough spots in the Gospel account, raises new ones. Crace is a writer of hallucinatory skill and considerable cruelty. The beatings and thievery of the ancient world, its intimate murderous commerce with animals, and its bestial treatment of women are not stinted, nor the compromised quality of religious experience, nor the deadly beauty of desert mountains. In one temptation, according to Matthew and Luke, Satan asks Jesus to turn stones into bread; Jesus refuses, and Crace, too, leaves the stones the dignity of their stoniness.