

washingtonpost.com

▼ ADVERTISING

An Array of Takes on Thomas

Offerings Include Several Titles on Newly Popular Approach to Jesus

By Bill Broadway
Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, September 18, 2004; Page B09

St. Thomas arguably is the most popular chronicler of Jesus -- outside organized Christianity, that is.

Discovered more than half a century ago at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, the Gospel of Thomas is a listing of 114 purported sayings of Jesus that emphasize the divinity within each person. This and a lack of references to the Crucifixion, Resurrection and salvation through Jesus as Christ make for a kind of feel-good spirituality that appeals to Christians and non-Christians alike.

Dozens of Thomas titles are available in bookstores and via the Internet, and the mix of scholarly and popular offerings continues. Elaine Pagels, whose "Gnostic Gospels" introduced Thomas to non-academics 25 years ago, boosted his popularity last fall with "Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas," intended to appeal to Christians who no longer accept the church's traditional teachings.

In May, Marvin Meyer published a new translation, "The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus" (HarperSanFrancisco), that includes the original Coptic text alongside the English and an interpretation by literary critic Harold Bloom. And in a new work called "Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?" (Riverhead, \$24.95, Oct. 7), Bloom includes Thomas among history's most noted sages.

"I've taken back the Gospel of Thomas," Bloom said in an interview, a reference to what he calls the New Age tendency of making "hash and mincemeat" of venerable texts and traditions (e.g., Thomas and Kabbalah) to create some new form of spirituality. That comment could apply to the new release "The Gnostic Gospel of St. Thomas: Meditations on the Mystical Teachings," by a Gnostic-Kabbalah practitioner, or "The Gospel of Thomas: A Guidebook for Spiritual Practice."

Bloom, a Jew, said he has long admired the Gospel of Thomas and finds its message "disturbing and at the same time gratifying." He understands its appeal, especially to Americans, whose spirituality is rooted in individuality and a personal connection to the divine -- a strong component of Gnostic practice.

"Setting aside the New Age nonsense, [the Gospel of Thomas] has the dignity, power and persuasiveness of a ritual text," Bloom said. "Each time I've finished reading it I find him irresistible, this Jesus."

Here is a selected list of books about Thomas and other recent and coming offerings that represent the open, varied world of religious publishing. Dates indicate projected release dates of books not yet available.

THE BIBLE IN HISTORY: HOW THE TEXTS HAVE SHAPED THE TIMES, by David W. Kling (Oxford, \$35). The author shows how eight passages of scripture influenced major religious and political movements in the West, from monasticism and Pentecostalism to civil rights and women's ordination. Kling, a professor of religious studies at the University of Miami, says a desire to bridge scholarly and lay readings led to this book and revealed how multiple generations reinterpreted the texts in light of social, cultural and political forces.

THE BOOK OF CUSTOMS: A COMPLETE HANDBOOK FOR THE JEWISH YEAR, by Scott-Martin Kosofsky with a foreword by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner (HarperSanFrancisco, \$29.95, Oct. 1). Inspired by the 1593 Venetian edition of *Minhogimbukh*, a Yiddish guide to Jewish practice, "Book of Customs" is a updated handbook to rituals, liturgies and prayers. Kosofsky, a book designer, illustrates his text with woodcuts taken from various editions of *Minhogimbukh* and includes some colorful but sobering sayings, such as: "If a man does not see his shadow on the night of Hoshana Rabbah [the last day of Sukkot], it is a sign that he is to die in the coming year."

THE CASE FOR A CREATOR: A JOURNALIST INVESTIGATES SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE THAT POINTS TOWARD GOD, by Lee Strobel (Zondervan, \$19.99). An atheist-turned-evangelical Christian, Strobel relinquished a 14-year newspaper career to join the staff of Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago and later set off on his own as one of the evangelical community's most popular apologists. Strobel has a degree from Yale Law School, and in "Case for a Creator," as in his best-selling "Case for Christ," he uses a courtroom-style presentation to make his case -- here, that the universe was God's design, not a chance happening.

CRUSADE: CHRONICLES OF AN UNJUST WAR, by James Carroll (Metropolitan, \$25). Carroll, who argued in "Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews" (2001) that Roman Catholic anti-Semitism contributed to the Holocaust, takes on the Bush administration in a collection of columns published in the Boston Globe over a three-year period. Carroll argues that President Bush's use of "crusade" to initially describe the war on terrorism accurately characterizes the administration's foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq.

THE Gnostic GOSPEL OF ST. THOMAS: MEDITATIONS ON THE MYSTICAL TEACHINGS, by Tau Malachi (Llewellyn, softcover \$17.95). A biographical page describes Malachi as a "modern mystic" who has achieved the rank of *tau*, a Gnostic elder "who embodies something of a higher consciousness." He suggests the need for "a new gospel, a gospel of the Cosmic Christ" -- a Christ inherent in every person, not the crucified-risen Christ revered by the church -- and proceeds to give three- to five-page "meditations" on each of the 114 sayings in Thomas, weaving in teachings from the Kabbalah and other mystical traditions.

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS: A GUIDEBOOK FOR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE, by Ron Miller (Skylight Paths, \$14.99 softcover). Miller, chairman of the religion department at Lake Forest College in Illinois and founder of the interfaith group Common Ground, incorporates other traditions into his reading of Thomas, including Buddhism and Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam. But his approach is less esoteric than Malachi's, providing practical suggestions and discussion points on the way to becoming "Jesus's twin" -- the goal of what he calls a "Thomas believer." His intended audience is spiritual seekers of all faiths.

HELP: THE ORIGINAL HUMAN DILEMMA, by Garret Keizer (HarperSanFrancisco, \$24.95). From the story of the Good Samaritan, depicted on the cover, to the question of whether altruism increases or diminishes with age, Keizer examines the motivations, ethics, rewards and risks in offering help to others. Wanting to help is a basic human need, he says, and people agonizing over what to do can take comfort in the fact that they are not alone.

IN SEARCH OF PAUL: HOW JESUS' APOSTLE OPPOSED ROME'S EMPIRE WITH GOD'S KINGDOM, by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed (HarperSanFrancisco, \$29.95, Nov. 1). Crossan and Reed, who collaborated on "Excavating Jesus" (2001), a textual and archaeological examination of New Testament history, turn their focus to the Apostle Paul. The authors argue that Paul did not invent Christianity, as many credit him with doing, but was the Jewish champion of a Jesus-inspired movement that thought the world would end soon and focused his efforts not on a future church but on fighting for equality and justice against the Roman Empire.

INTERRUPTED BY GOD: GLIMPSES FROM THE EDGE, by Tracey Lind, with a foreword by Diana Butler Bass (Pilgrim, \$24, Oct. 1). Lind is dean of Trinity Episcopal Church in Cleveland and one of the first openly gay Episcopal priests. In a series of essays and meditations, illustrated by her own black-and-white photographs, she tells of her agonizing decision to go public with her homosexuality and gives testimony to a life's work in support of environmental justice, interfaith relations, effective urban planning, arts and culture and diversity within the Episcopal Church.

INVENTING SUPERSTITION: FROM THE HIPPOCRATICS TO THE CHRISTIANS, by Dale B. Martin (Harvard, \$29.95, Nov. 1). Greek and Roman intellectuals denounced the common belief of their time that gods and demons were capable of causing harm as well as bringing good to people's lives. Such beings were morally superior and could act only nobly -- and anyone who said differently promoted "contagious superstition." Christianity won out over philosophy, Martin says, because it acknowledged people's fears of the supernatural and provided an antidote in the form of Jesus, a divine being who could overpower demons.

JOY UNSPEAKABLE: CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES OF THE BLACK CHURCH, by Barbara A. Holmes (Augsburg, \$19 softcover). Holmes, a Memphis professor, pastor and lawyer, last wrote about the black church in "Race and the Cosmos" (2002), a look at African Americans' place in the universe. Now she looks at a different universality: the religious consciousness of black Americans that transcends denominations and secularity. This collective imagination is "deeply ensconced within . . . the wider society and can be found in Coltrane's riffs and Malcolm's exhortations, the Step Brothers' dance routines and the fortitude of Thurgood Marshall," she writes.

PULPIT AND POLITICS: CLERGY IN AMERICAN POLITICS AT THE ADVENT OF THE MILLENNIUM, edited by Corwin E. Smidt (Baylor, \$34.95 softcover, Sept. 24). Leading analysts of religion and politics surveyed clergy in two dozen denominations and religious associations on theological, moral and cultural issues and the extent to which their beliefs affect their political behavior. The result is a wide-ranging look at denominational attitudes toward the political process and religious-inspired activism.

THE QUR'AN: A NEW TRANSLATION, by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford, \$27). Muslims learn Arabic so they can read and quote their scripture in its purest form. But most non-Muslims rely on translations, and previous English translations are filled with archaic language and meaningless idioms, says Haleem, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of London. He presents this new translation so that people will understand the original more clearly, especially on such topics as jihad, medical ethics and the role of women.

REFLECTION ON THE BIBLE: HUMAN WORD AND THE WORD OF GOD, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, translated by M. Eugene Boring. (Hendrickson, \$9.95 softcover, Oct. 15). This small book, 120 pages, offers a new English translation of the German theologian's meditations, sermons and essays on the Bible. Included are excerpts from letters written in a Nazi prison before his 1945 execution -- just weeks before the Allies liberated Europe.

THE WOMEN WHO DANCED BY THE SEA: FINDING OURSELVES IN THE STORIES OF OUR BIBLICAL FOREMOTHERS, by Marsha Mirkin (Monkfish, \$16.95 softcover). Do psychotherapy and biblical narrative go hand in hand? Psychologist Mirkin says they do and weaves accounts of modern patients' troubles with the stories of Eve, Rebecca, Rachel, Miriam and other foremothers. The story of Sarah, for example, gives hope to women who have trouble getting pregnant (Sarah had Isaac at 90) but also shows the tragic results of Sarah's vindictive behavior toward Hagar, her servant and the mother of Abraham's son Ishmael.

© 2004 The Washington Post Company

Advertising Links by Google	What's this?
<p>Gospel of Thomas The only pocket-sized edition Order Direct from Amazon.com www.amazon.com</p> <p>Gnostic Gospels Several title in stock today We ship immediately www.episcopalbookstore.com</p> <p>Beyond Belief The Secret Get this popular book free. Free shipping. Sign up now. www.freegiftworld.com</p>	