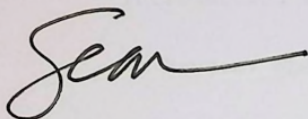


1/30/97

Dear Judith,

Many thanks for the disk -- saved me much time. The enclosed is now with Veronica for copy editing.

All best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Sam". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the text "All best,".

Norman Mailer On His New Novel, The Gospel According to the Son

An Interview by Sean Abbott for At Random
(spring/summer 1997 issue -- April 17 publication)

Introduction TK.

At Random: Where did this book come from?

Norman Mailer: I've been trying to answer that question for myself. I like to work out of instinct, so I'm not inclined to chart what I'm going to do before I begin. By now, this method works most of the time for me because the instinct's gotten fairly experienced. I think it's been close to thirty years since I started a book and didn't finish it. I expect it's almost animal-like, the way an animal knows it's time to come out of hibernation, so it digs its way up to the surface whether it has a clear take or not on what the weather might be.

AR: You've mentioned that there are personal matters behind this Jesus novel. What are they?

NM: I would say this book was written to fill an empty space in my mind. What's almost never discussed because it's too touchy a subject is how it feels to be Jewish growing up in a benign Christian country. Certainly, in this respect, America is now relatively benign. Jews do not face intense problems of anti-Semitism here today. My mother did. She grew up in a small town in New Jersey, and the kids used to call her sheeney or Christ-killer. She kept hearing these epithets on the way to school. Or, so she remembered it. She hated the

Irish for years because they used to do that to her. Later, when I had a great many Irish friends, because I always felt some kind of instinctive linkage with the Irish, she never could comprehend it. How could her son love the Irish? [Laughs]

In any event things have changed drastically since my mother was a girl. During my childhood, anti-Semitism was prominent to us, but it was across the ocean, there with Hitler. So one grew up with this intense notion of what it was to be a Jew. It meant you were at the mercy of forces much larger than the deterioration of your own body. But the Holocaust gave a profound shock to the majority of Christians in America and aroused a detestation of anti-Semitism that was far more intense than the American anti-Semitism that then existed. So any anti-Semitism I encountered was essentially benign. Still, you feel subtly excluded. Christmas is not for you, and you don't know anything about Jesus Christ. You haven't grown up with him. When I was a kid, it was almost as if Christ was the enemy, the renegade Jew, the one who brought all the trouble down on the Jews. At least that was the mentality of the immigrant first generation and second generation Jews I grew up with. And then, of course, later in life one became sophisticated about it; Christ was certainly not the enemy but he was still very much the stranger.

AR: In what sense? You were living among Christians? Reading the Bible?

NM: Yes, once in a while I'd take a look at the New Testament and couldn't make head or tail of it. I used to wonder why Christians felt so intensely about it because it simply didn't do a great deal for me. When

you read a book, it either changes you a little or it doesn't. I just didn't have any kind of reaction to it, but I did feel a void. I live in a country, I love the country, I hate it. I'm dealing with it all the time in my writing, I write about Christians, I try to write about them well. I even understand them in the technical sense well enough to write about them, but always at the core I feel I'm a stranger in this country, and I'm certainly a stranger to Christianity.

It wasn't as if I said to myself, Now I have to fill that void, since things don't work that way, but about three years ago Pope John Paul II published a set of interviews in depth and I read the book out of curiosity. I'd been interested in the Pope for quite a while because he had written an encyclical about eight or nine years ago that was so good I wanted PEN to make him an honorary member, which got the PEN members feeling . . . I've never seen them so agitated. [Laughs] But in fact it was a remarkable encyclical. It's disappeared, just about; nobody ever refers to it any more. The Cold War was still on, so maybe this was ten years ago. He said that there were two superpowers, and one represented the forces of greed and the other the forces of oppression, and then there was the third world who were terribly underprivileged because of these two superpowers. He added that there was a fourth world which included all the underprivileged who lived among the two superpowers, particularly in America with our homeless. He made a point of that. I thought it was a remarkable document. He said he'd looked through the various possibilities and ended up with a feeling that if it came to it, the Vatican would have to sell its treasures. In the course of reading this book it was obvious that, of the four Gospels, the Gospel of John meant the most to him. He kept referring to it. So I

picked up the Gospel of John and again found it off-putting -- I didn't feel close. But I was curious now.

Concurrently with this let me say there was another force working, which was that my wife, Norris, with whom I've been together now for twenty-two years, comes from a small town in Arkansas, and she was brought up an observant Baptist. Her parents are intensely religious. They go to church every Sunday and a couple of times in the middle of the week. Her father's a deacon in a Free-Will Baptist church and when we go to visit them, if I'm there on a Sunday, he invites me to Sunday school, to Bible class.

AR: A children's Sunday school?

NM: It's an adult Sunday school class, separate from the sermon and separate from the children. I remember the first time I went, how amazed they were to see me. They were welcoming a most extraordinary creature. A Jew!

AR: For the first time?

NM: To my knowledge no other Jew had ever come to that Sunday school class. It's a small town in Arkansas. I don't know if there's a single Jew living in Atkins. My wife says I was the first one she ever met.

AR: Did they know who you are in the scheme of things?

NM: Sort of. They know that I'm some well-known writer from New York. He writes a lot of books, we hear. Stuff like that. And he's Jewish. They hear that. Because it was very interesting to them that one of their local girls had married a Jew. They were so excited that I

was visiting their Sunday school class. Because they'd been reading about Jesus the Jew for thirty, forty, fifty years. They'd been living with it. And they'd never seen a Jew. And now there was one in the house. So they approached me with the most curious kind of respect, asked me to read certain passages because they had a lot of difficulty with some of the lines. They found them mysterious. They assumed because I was Jewish, I'd have a better idea. It left me with the thought that devout Christians might also feel a little out of it. So that was the other source of this book. I decided to take a look at the New Testament after reading John Paul's book, and did, and found it curious in the extreme. I thought, this may be, as Fulton Oursler once said -- ever hear of him: he wrote a book called The Greatest Story Ever Told -- very popular thirty, forty years ago. And I thought, this is the greatest story ever told, and it's been written by a committee.

AR: The "four" of them?

NM: With the possible exception of John. That could have been written by one man. But with the others three, Mark, Matthew, and Luke -- the Synoptic Gospels -- you can just see the committee for each Gospel arguing over what should go into the text, because each member wanted to get his specific tenets into it and, no matter, if it contradicted other tenets. The Gospels do contain incredible sentences that good Christians live with, sentences that stir the heart, but whenever you don't have a wonderful sentence, what you receive is some very 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. Not that many readers live with the entire story. People are either so pious that they can't enjoy it as a narrative -- rather they live with specific passages -- or they're angry at it because they feel the New Testament is part of the oppression of society. If they're coming from the Left, they have a tendency to satirize it. Not that many people ever approach the New Testament and say, "Look, this is the myth that has been at the center of Western civilization for 2,000 years." But, myths have to be told well. So I thought: If I can write about Isis and Osiris and Ra, then certainly Jesus is not going to be that difficult to do. And in a sense it wasn't. In contrast to the complexity of the ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris, this is simpler and more beautiful. And far more cohesive. It was perfectly conceivable to me that one could have a character in a novel who's the Son of God. Novelists are supposed to look into the eye of the tiger.

AR: Let's not miss something important here. You've taken an extraordinary leap to go from realizing that the story needs to be told better to deciding that the teller ought to be Christ himself.

NM: There again, was my instinct: If I'm going to tell the story freshly, then I've got to avoid the third person. Otherwise, I would have an ersatz Gospel. I would go so far as to say that, paradoxically, the presence of the author, Norman Mailer, would be much more intrusive in the third person. Whereas, if it's in the first person, there might be a vibrancy to it. Jesus could come alive as a character. I also felt -- there's the real dare. What's the use of being a writer as old as I am, if you can't still take a dare. And I

thought this one's fine because I have a slight understanding of what it's like to be half a man and half something else, something larger. Believe it if you will, but I mean this modestly. Every man has a different kind of life and mine had a peculiar turn. It was changed completely at the age of twenty-five when The Naked and the Dead came out. Obviously, a celebrity is a long, long, long, long way from the celestial, but nonetheless it does mean that you have two personalities that you live with all the time. One is your simple self, so to speak, which is to some degree still like other people, and then there's the opposite one, the media entity, which gives you power that you usually don't know how to use well. So the parallel was stronger than I realized. At any rate, I thought it would be agreeable to plunge in.

AR: Did you get any resistance to the project at home?

NM: My wife, having grown up with her background, was appalled, utterly appalled. She started stamping her foot, which she rarely does. This was a great help to the book because I began to understand that if I'm handling dynamite, then let me learn how to handle it. In the beginning I had this idea that I wanted to write the book in the language of the Gospels and Norris said "Why?" and I said, "Because I want your father to be able to read this book." She said, "He will never be able to read this book! You don't know what you're doing!" [Laughs] And about that time, Jason Epstein [Mailer's Random House editor] came in and said, "I hate this style, it's wrong for this." And I thought about it and thought about it and I concluded that maybe they were right. To a degree at any rate. So I simplified the style to make it less like the Gospels,

just reminiscent of them rather than almost together in their syntax. Sentences like "So did I now think that the time was upon me" began to come out. I must have edited the book six or seven times to get the style feeling right for myself.

AR: I was surprised by this Jesus, by the violence and lust evident within him, by the savagery. Where did it come from?

NM: I don't see him as full of violence and lust. Certainly not next to other men of his time. He does have strong feelings, but most of the savagery in his language comes when he quotes the Old Testament to himself. You may be certain I reread the Old Testament a few times in the course of writing this, and the violence there is immense; the punishments that people undergo are incredible. Don't forget these books were written by men, and their understanding of a God was that anyone who could be that powerful had to be brutal. Obviously, Jehovah is the mirror of a savage time. So how could you not have Jesus experiencing some turbulent and extreme moments? I thought the idea of Jesus as our sweet, gentle fellow just doesn't accomplish anything. And then, when you add in the New Testament, you have his contradictions of person. He's gentle one moment, angry in another, he's for the poor, he complains about the poor, he speaks of taking care of one's mother, then tells people to forsake their family. All right, why? Because he's a man. He may be the Son of God, but he's very much a man.

AR: He has "onslaughts of unclean feeling, much at odds with my beliefs," when he thinks of the "lewd acts" of the Emperor and Empress.

NM: What I wanted to do with the book, really I had one thought above all, which was that I spent my life writing about people. Generally I like to write about characters who have a mixed nature, somewhat good, somewhat bad. I was always struck with the way Dostoevsky wanted to write about the life of a saint, and died before he could do it. Now, it isn't that I see myself wearing the mantle of Dostoevsky, but it occurred to me that there's probably nothing more difficult than to write about a good man. And whatever else Jesus was, he was that. Yes, he would lose his temper, yes, once in awhile, he would have thoughts that were all but lascivious, at least in my version. But, whatever he was, he was a good man. I became very fond of him. As I was writing the book, I thought, finally with the great aid of an awful lot of writing that's come before this, I'm getting some sense finally of what a good man is, and it doesn't mean that he is good all the time; it means that he is trying to be a lot better than he ought to be. Given his early life, what was he expected to become, but another devout, pious, somewhat stricken Essene? That may seem like an odd remark, but a novelist usually ends up reacting to his characters as if they were real.

AR: Did you have any difficulty with some of the elements of the story? I note that Jesus prefers metaphor to miracle in certain instances. Of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, he says: "And I took those five loaves and divided them exceedingly small. Yet when each person had tasted these fragments, so do I believe that each morsel became enlarged within his thoughts. And this was a triumph of the Spirit rather than an enlargement of matter."

NM: My instinct was that this miracle couldn't be written about in any really interesting way if you started to have loaves of bread pouring forth of a hole in the earth, or coming down from the sky. It satisfied the miracles equally well, to take a smaller approach.

AR: I'm interested because metaphor, the stripping out of the supernatural, actually places us closer to an historical Jesus. There's been a great flood of books recently on the historical Jesus. The revisionist Jesus Seminar has been in the news, as has "Q," the theoretical ur-text out of which the Synoptic Gospels are said to have grown (or to have been buried under). Did you look to any of this material while writing the novel?

NM: I'd read two of Elaine Pagels's books, The Gnostic Gospels and The Origin of Satan, and I found them very interesting and to a good degree useful, but I knew I did not want to get into trying to search out the real story. In fact, after I'd gone through the first couple of drafts I thought, Well, I really have to do a lot of reading now, so I did and read some most interesting books. I read John Meyer, Pagels, John Dominic Crossan. But, at a certain point, I decided that I'm not trying to write a definitive work about the period. I want rather to do what I started to do: that is, bring this myth to life using the means of a good novelist. And that made me start thinking about my profession. Because it seemed to me that I work in a valuable and honorable profession that is most unhappily on the way out, as much on the way out, I fear, as coachmen on Central Park South. In a hundred years we may bear the same relation to world culture that those coachmen do now, the ones who sit outside the Plaza and

occasionally drive a couple in a carriage behind one old horse. That's the gloomy scenario I see for novelists, a future when best-selling novels will be written by computers. We're halfway there already. Yet, there is something that good novelists can do. They are able to approach certain aspects of reality in a way that no one else can. And that's what we're supposed to do. It just seemed to me that we can have a kind of understanding if we're pure novelists -- by pure novelists I mean that we spend our lives working at being novelists: Saul Bellow, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Kurt Vonnegut, Bill Styron, come first to mind, but I could name ten more. You spend your life being a novelist and you end up having an understanding of existence that's quite the equal of a psychoanalyst, or a physicist, or a rocket engineer, or a big economist. It is just that we see the world in a different way. We try to view it in whole, try to puzzle out the way everything fits together or doesn't. So I thought, Yes, it doesn't have to be me, but I'm one of the fifty or 100 novelists in the world who could rewrite the New Testament. And I'm going to do it.

AR: Recalling what you said earlier about reading for the Baptists, who were turning to a Jew for some new insight, well, does being a Jew offer any?

NM: Being Jewish is an inestimable advantage because I tend to believe there is virtually a Jewish psychology, a Jewish way of looking at things. I found Christ very Jewish. So I proceeded to write about him as profoundly Jewish, even though he was a rebel. Probably one third of all Jews are powerful rebels. So there was that. There was also the sense always that you never get something for nothing. That conviction is at the very

center of Jewish belief, as opposed to Christian belief, where God takes mercy on you, gives you grace, and you're lifted and you're saved. The Jews tend to believe that you never get it without paying something in return. So it would seem to me that it is delightful to contemplate these miracles once you recognize that you can use yourself up by performing too many miracles in a day -- indeed, the angels whisper to Jesus at a certain point, and say in effect, "Don't overdo it."

AR: We're still dealing with limitations here, a really thorny theological problem. Why did God send a Son who is also a man? Why go to all that trouble to send down an imperfect creature? Unless it's precisely imperfection that's wanted, in which case you can go to the opposite extreme. I'm reminded of Borges's notion that Jesus wasn't the Son of God. Judas was. Because Judas, in betraying Jesus and earning damnation, made the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus gave his life, but Judas gave his soul. A thrilling idea, but whether it's one or the other of them, we still have to return to the problem of sending a man to do the Lord's work.

NM: Borges may have been inspired by Kierkegaard. But I'm looking for something else. I'm trying to get people to come to grips with the idea that God is not all powerful. The comprehension I have of God is anthropomorphic. God is doing the best that He or She can do -- or They can do. Maybe it's a marriage, I don't know. The idea we receive from the Bible that God is all powerful creates a philosophical impasse. I think one of the reasons why philosophy has not produced anything truly interesting since the Second World War -- anything truly interesting in the way that seventeenth-, eighteenth-, even nineteenth-century

philosophy dealt with huge and/or universal themes -- is because philosophy can't digest the Holocaust. If God is all good and all powerful, then how do you explain that catastrophe to our understanding of human nature and divinity? The one thing we know is that it was godawful. Look at the expression! "God awful." Where was God while the Holocaust was going on? People are paralyzed intellectually by that conundrum. Yet, I think the answer is simple once you decide that God is not all powerful but merely doing His best, because then the Holocaust becomes one of the greatest defeats God ever experienced. Another, I believe, was the death of the Son.

AR: Really, a defeat?

NM: It wasn't a victory. I don't believe God sent his Son to be killed. Look at what's involved here. What would you think of a movie director sending his son out to shoot a scene that's going to be so incredibly dangerous that the son is likely to get killed? What would we say of such a director?

AR: He's out of business.

NM: Yes, he's out of business in our hearts. We don't revere him. We are appalled by him. We may never stop thinking about him, but we don't revere him. No, I've always seen it, if I'm going to try to understand God at all, I believe that God's had great victories and great defeats, and the death of Jesus is one of those defeats and the Holocaust is another.

AR: Well, the Christians will say, without the greatest defeat you cannot have the greatest triumph, which is

the Resurrection. But you're saying the triumph is nothing against the magnitude of the failure -- the failures.

NM: Now, that's probably the most shocking single element in The Gospel According to the Son -- that God is not all powerful. For me, it's a more beautiful and troubling concept, that God is doing the best that He can do, than that He is all-powerful. If you live with this idea, you have to start thinking of yourself as, yes, a servant of God, but in a true sense, as a soldier. We are not here on earth to abase ourselves and abase ourselves in order to have our ticket stamped for Heaven, but are here to work at God's ongoing intentions. If the notion that we do the best we can is extended to God doing the best He or She can, well, that suggests that there are other forces at work in the universe, forces opposed to God. It's no longer a stage show where the universe is presenting an immense drama, all for God's edification. And at the end of it, He will reward or punish the actors. No, that's not it at all. The universe is unfinished, and God is trying to improve it. God's a general, God's an admiral. God's sailing across the universe, and we are his troops, some of us at any rate.

AR: Since you mention "other forces," let's talk of the Devil. To return to an old notion of yours: you do some small deals with the Devil to do larger good for God.

NM: You hope you are. I go back to Kierkegaard, who once said, in effect, that the moment we think we are being most holy, and feel closest to God, we could be working for the Devil -- and vice versa: When we think we're being debased and evil and serving Satan, we

could be fulfilling God's intentions and not know it. So you have to have a fundamental modesty about your own moral state. If someone says to me, "Well, do you think you're working for God or the Devil on this book?" I'd say, "Well, I hope I know I'm working for Him (or Her!), but I can't be certain." Just as a novelist can create any character except for a novelist better than himself, so you can set yourself up as a moralist able to judge the good or bad morals of everybody, except for one person -- yourself.

AR: I still feel unsatisfied on one point. To be brusque about it, do you believe that Jesus was the son of God, or don't you?

NM: Yes. As a novelist, I do. As a novelist, I believe Jesus was the son of God. You can't be a serious writer of fiction unless you believe the story you are telling. In that sense you are like an actor who can't give a truly good performance unless he becomes the person he is playing (at least while he is in the role). So, yes, intrigued by the myth, and more than a little intrigued, I certainly believed in it as I was writing it. Believed in the miracles, believed in the successes and failures of the ministry, believed that Jesus was the son of God.

AR: But as the man -- not the novelist -- what do you believe in?

NM: Ah, there my mind is open. When I step away from the novel, the myth is still there -- at the least, it is still the most powerful myth of the last 2,000 years. So my feeling is that something certainly happened. Intellectually, I don't feel that miracles

are impossible -- if I did, I could never have entered the imaginative framework in which the book is written, no more than Woody Allen, for example, would choose to play a character modeled after Mike Tyson.

But, as I say, I think something did happen in that period, or the myth could not have taken on its first intensity. And, of course, I believe that the greatest myths are never divorced from our deepest sense of reality -- the primitive knowledge with which we are born. That kind of knowledge we are able to sense despite all the barriers of our modern development, and we can even sense how it motivates us without our conscious understanding or control -- this primitive knowledge we can never quite name.

In answer to your question, therefore, I was able, as a novelist, to believe that the events in the New Testament occurred. So I could write about them as if they were real. But when I step away from the book, it also seems fair to me to apply my own judgments to the story. Those conclusions do not have to agree with the declarations and pieties of the New Testament. For that reason, I don't feel any confusion in creating my notion of Jesus, that son of a god who is not all-powerful.