

IN REVIEW

In his autobiography, Jesus tells his story as only Mailer can

"The Gospel According to the Son"
By Norman Mailer
Ballantine Books, 242 pages. \$12

By WILLIAM RANKIN

This is Jesus' story as told by himself, or rather as Norman Mailer imagines he would tell it. The acclaimed author of 29 other books — one a National Book Award winner and two others Pulitzer Prize honorees — has accorded his subject the honor due his name.

Mailer has competently studied the gospels, Hebrew Scriptures and, evidently, extra-canonical sources as well. As a result, his protagonist is credibly situated within the context of first-century Judaism. Any one familiar with the New Testament will feel at home here, and the book is an easy read — deceptively so since its wonderful writing style might lull you into missing the richness, here and there, of what is being said.

The reader is drawn into the very human mind of the God-man. What is there includes ambivalence about some of the biblical statements attributed to Jesus. A few of these are downright misleading. He complains about Luke and John, for instance, who described Jesus as gentle when he was in fact "pale with rage." The evangelists

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"A STAGGERING WORK" — *The Philadelphia Inquirer*
"BOLD...DARING" — *The New York Times Book Review*
"A TRIUMPH." — *Publishers Weekly*

The Gospel According to the Son Norman Mailer

also concocted events that never occurred, says Jesus — they did so in responding to the concerns of the communities for which they wrote. Jesus also notes that, writing so

long after his death, the gospel writers were dependent upon inaccurate reports by "old men."

Mailer fills in certain of the lacunae in the canonical record. One of these, an accounting for Jesus' unmarried status, is his childhood in an Essene community, in which men were taught "not to pursue women."

Some of the writer's phrases are wonderfully pregnant. John the Baptist tells Jesus, "You will root out evil with God's mercy." (Meditate on that.) Other phrases go simply and directly to the heart of the Savior: "I was yet to learn that I would care about sinners more than for the pious." Concerning the devil's treacherous power to enthrall: "He did not inspire fear but comfort. ... I could talk to the devil; he was comfortable" (grist for a sermon here).

Throughout this tale, Jesus is conscious of the

guidance and the terrible death of his teacher. John the Baptist is persistently in the background. And the carpenter's respect for the soul-destroying ravages of guilt and shame leads to an immense compassion for sinners. This is described in spiritually rich but simple language: "I now comprehend those waste-places in the hearts of others where a good opinion of oneself cannot be kept, not even in contemplating one's good deeds. The soul can feel empty before the memory of its sins." Some of the insights Mailer attributes to Jesus should have been included in the Bible, like this one: "No heart is so hard as the timid heart."

The fictional Jesus is transparently human. Some of his attempted healings fail. He experiences terrible fears in the night. He becomes enraged at the privileged, including the clergy, the magnitude of whose vanity is matched by their indifference to the poor. Agonizing under a terrible premonition, Jesus remembers the devil's sinister prediction that "the alms raised in your name will swell the treasury of mighty

churches." So profound a misunderstanding of his mission as this confounds him. He ceases to know if he is to save the world or only to be condemned by it.

Jesus' last words are preserved in the Bible; in this book Mailer reports his final earthly thought. The closing pages are glorious.

The familiarity of the Jesus story may have weakened its potency for some. But "The Gospel According to the Son" presents a fresh perspective; it engages and challenges the imagination.

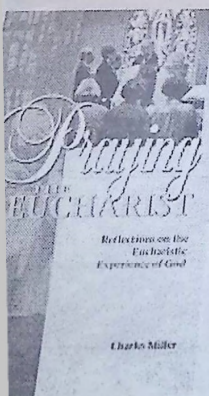
This book would be a provocative, rich discussion resource for both youth and adult educators. For general readers, it would be a grand and poignant adventure as well.

The Rev. William W. Rankin is vice president of the United Religions Initiative, San Francisco.

BOOKS BY EPISCOPALIANS

Healing through Prayer by Larry Dossey, Herbert Benson, John Polkinghorne and others, with foreword by Peter Downie (Anglican Book Centre, Toronto/Forward Movement, U.S., \$15.95, also available on video) in a question-and-answer format, tells the stories of physicians, nurses, patients, clergy and members of healing ministries, all of whom are convinced that prayer has a profound effect on people's lives. Some particular experiences of healing through prayer are described, and perspectives from Anglican, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and Native American situations and persuasions are given, as well as a report on Burrowswood, a Christian healing center in the United Kingdom. □

Praying the Eucharist: Reflections on the Eucharistic Experience of God by Charles Miller (Morehouse, \$8.95) is a series of reflections on the basic structure of the Eucharist as prayer. Miller walks us through the eucharistic journey, explaining it in words, while reminding us that the mystery goes beyond words. In the end, as the Spirit draws us and as we approach God, after all the words,



we "act out with the language of our bodies, with sign and symbol, with celebratory song, the joyful intimacy with the Father, which is ours in Christ." □

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