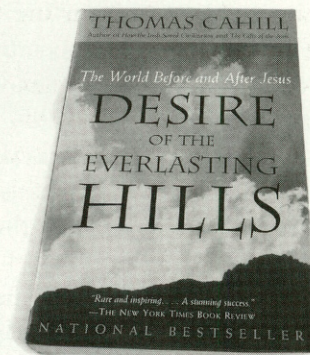


Inspiration to Live the Jesus Story

Thomas Cahill. *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus*. New York: Random House, 1999.

Reviewed by Glen Greenwalt



Thomas Cahill's book, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, reminds me of my own world before and after Jesus.

I had gone off to college to escape the hard work of the farm. I was going to be a dentist, become rich (my perception of dentists at the time), attract a beautiful wife, build a house with a view, ski, play tennis, and travel the world.

Then in my first weeks at college I met some of Jesus' flesh-and-blood followers, and I gave up the first two items on my list and subordinated the others to my goal of following Jesus. The Jesus to which these disciples introduced me is the same Jesus I meet again in Cahill's book: A revolutionary figure out to change the world, not by violence, but by prayer and kindness—King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, who was, in fact, plain good news for ordinary, everyday people with all of our hurts, disappointments, and aspirations. This cannot be said of most kings and lords.

Cahill is above all a masterful storyteller. Although he introduces the novice reader into the world of critical Jesus studies, he writes as one so enmeshed in the story that he is untroubled by the discrepancies, biases, and personal agendas woven into every human fabrication of a story—including the Jesus Story.

Cahill begins his tale on the crest of the Janiculum. If you have been to Rome, you most likely know this hill, if not by name. If you haven't, put it on your agenda. The view that

overlooks Rome is spectacular, and as a bonus you can watch Italian families playing with their children in the park at the top of the hill. The Janiculum rises steeply from the west bank of the Tiber from St. Peter's Cathedral to the narrow, mazelike streets of Trastevere.

This ridge serves as the spine of the book, connecting the beginning to the end and giving posture to the book's central theme. For Cahill, "the history of the world, like the history of its hills, is written in the blood of barbaric warriors and bold partisans, of old women and beardless boys, of the guilty and the innocent" (8). Yet in this history resides the resilient hope of a world, where all the soldiers are sent home from war, and all the women are loved and cherished, and the children laugh and play.

On a summer's day, Janiculum gives the impression of being such a world. Italian lovers sit on the terrace wall and families spread blankets and picnic. But it was not always so. Cahill informs us that in 1849 an army of boys as young as fourteen battled seasoned French

and papal troops on this spot in an insane attempt to dissolve the Papal States and unite Italy. There are no monuments to these child-soldiers, Cahill tells us, but although they lost the battle, they won the war. Today, the peninsula of Italy is a single (if loosely united) country, and the once powerful papal temporal state is confined to the Vatican at the foot of the hill.

This scene is the visual icon of Cahill's story of Jesus. Here we see a microcosm of human history: the villainy of the powerful; the irrepressible desire of ordinary folk for freedom; and the unexpected victory of the weak over the strong. Although Jesus was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, he bore little identity to those who assumed such titles in history. From an extended discussion of the lives of Alexander the Great and Octavian Caesar Augustus, Cahill shows us that a king or emperor proved himself fit for the job in Jesus' day by being "an excellent administrator, a politician of labyrinthine cunning, difficult, delusional, and cruel" (56). Peace in this world grew out of desolation and war: that was simply the way things were.

The prophets of Israel, however, harbored a vision so out of keeping with the usual travails of life that it reads, Cahill says, almost like a daydream. "A time is envisioned in which all wrongs shall be righted, the land once promised by God to

his people shall know everlasting peace, and a second David, appointed by God himself, will sit upon the throne of Israel" (60). What all people longed for in a leader was not an emperor, not an Exalted One—but a Just One (65). This vision, this daydream, if you will, the Gospel writers declared was fulfilled in the son of a carpenter family from the hill country of northern Palestine.

I am sure that New Testament scholars can find a good deal with which to quibble in Cahill's reading of the textual material. Cahill writes with the practiced eye of a storyteller, not as a scholar. As a nonscholar, I was entranced with the background information Cahill brings to his story. I found it so interesting, in fact, that I repeatedly called friends of mine who are New Testament scholars to see if they agreed with one point or another. As expected, they agreed with some but not others, and they shared a number of disagreements among themselves.

What I find refreshing about Cahill is that, although he allows for a great deal of authorial freedom in the construction of the New Testament, the force of the New Testament picture of Jesus is not eroded by the very human agendas that stand behind the text. This is unlike many conservative and liberal readings of the New Testament, which are so consumed with reconstructing or defending the text that they lose sight of the story's character.

Cahill's Jesus is the antithesis of the powerbrokers of the ancient world. In Mark's Gospel, his coming is announced by a figure right out of the prophet's ancient world: "a desert crazy" who told the people the "the time had come" and that they better get themselves ready (71). Mark is short and straight to the point. The unlikely

Gallilean that John the Baptist pointed out is the one predicted to come from ancient times. Matthew continues this theme, though with more subtly and mastery of intellectual discourse.

Jesus the actor is also Jesus the teacher. The theme of prophetic justice is still central, however. In the Beatitudes, Jesus never explicitly mentions Alexander or Augustus. "His references to oppression, war, torture, and the poverty created by military conquest are indirect (79). Instead of attacking them straight on, Jesus upholds a set of ideals:

Become one with the poor, defend their undefended interests, become sympathetic and forgiving toward others, make peace wherever you can. If you do these things, you will be happy. Indeed, these are the only ways to happiness. Power is an illusion and its exercise an excuse for cruelty. . . . Not exactly inspiration for Alexander, Augustus, or their admiring biographers. (78, 79)

Ordinary people stopped and listened. "This bold challenge to the existing mindset was unmistakable and arresting" (79).

Central to Jesus' vision, according to Cahill, is the following idea:

It is precisely the entitlement of the powerful and the disfranchisement of the powerless that make life so unlivable. And whether this enshrined and permanent injustice, taken for granted by all, issues in war, torture, and all the grand oppressions to which the Beatitudes allude or just in the petty tortures that we visit on one another—the casual oppression of women

by men, the interior wounds caused by quotidian mean-spiritedness, exclusiveness, and theatrical mendacity—spirit is crushed and ordinary life is made a torment. (83-84)

Truth told, we are all oppressors and victims at various moments. When we are at the bottom, Jesus taught that our "only 'obligation' (if that is not too strong a word) is to trust in God's mercy. But the obligation of those on top is to exhibit God's mercy toward those who have nothing" (84).

The irony, of course, is that Jesus himself experienced the fate of those he came to rescue. He himself was marginalized and finally killed, as have been countless others before and after. That Jesus' ignominious death by crucifixion troubled the early church is evident from the earliest pictures Christians left on catacomb walls. The images of the good shepherd, Noah's ark, doves, and the symbol of a fish (an acronym in Greek of Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior) appear countless times—but never once a cross.

The apostle Paul, more than any other writer in the Bible, worked out a theology of Jesus' death.

The "death to sin" that Paul speaks of is basically a relinquishing of power; it is to live a life that is the opposite of the lives of the Alexanders and the Caesars and all the "gods." Now, you may say, most of his hearers had little chance of imitating such exalted and august models. But Paul makes clear that the power plays of the Great Ones are imitated over and over again in the lives of little ones—through acts of petty cruelty. But those who have "died with Christ," who

have allowed themselves—at least vicariously—to experience all the depth of human suffering, can never stoop to gaining advantage over another, even if the other is clearly in the wrong. (134)

Although Cahill is not a theologian, I find his reading of the atonement as fine as any I have ever read. As Cahill notes, the cross is not just about obtaining personal atonement through a vicarious death that took place two millennia ago in Palestine by the God/man of classical theology. Vicariously, we all participate in the death of Jesus when we shoulder the same cross Jesus bore for the sins of others.

Through identity with Jesus, the disciples of Jesus become conduits of God's mercy to the world. "Even if someone is caught red-handed," Paul admonishes, "you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one with all gentleness—and watch out that you don't end up in the same position yourself! Carry one another's burden: this is the way to fulfill the 'law' of Christ" (135). As the Mystical Body of Christ, the disciples of Christ are obliged above all else to show love to those who fall across their path (143).

Of all the Gospel writers, Luke is preeminently the evangelist of God's mercy. Here we see most clearly, Cahill believes, Paul's insistence that "God's love for us is shown in that, *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us" (207). In Luke, we find the story of a prostitute accepted at the table fellowship, a prodigal child taken back into the arms of his father, and a healer who prays for the forgiveness of his executioners as they drive nails into his hands and feet. Luke's message is this: "God does not wait for our repentance;

he loves us *anyway*" (207). God is a spendthrift. He does not hoard his riches, nor should his followers. Their mission, like that of Jesus, is to comfort and heal.

The last witness to Jesus' life and work is the Gospel of John. This Gospel, as it has come down to us, represents a rather late

witness to the story of Jesus. Already, we see the beginnings of the imperial church, with its grand inquisitors and human bonfires. Although Jesus and his earliest disciples were all Jews, the enemies of Jesus in John are not Alexander and Augustus, but "the Jews."

Cahill suggests that Christian antagonism toward the Jews was born out of the persecution they received from the Jewish synagogues. Early Christians were thrown out of the synagogues and at times hunted down and killed. It can be said that rabbinical Judaism won the first round and continued to hold the upper hand for the next two centuries. However, the tide turned by the fourth century with Emperor Constantine's embrace of the Christian faith, "after which Christians will spend the next sixteen and a half centuries rounding up Jews, hunting them down, depriving them of civil rights, torturing, massacring, and ridiculing to their heart's content" (275).

How did those called to live differently than Alexander and Augustus become the Constantinian church of their imperial descendants? (275). Cahill insists that John, writing in the heat of controversy, can no more be blamed for the subsequent history of European anti-Semitism than can the *Birkat*

ha-minim, the Jewish ritual curse of the heretical Christians. Still, "his Gospel is capable of leaving Jewish readers purple with rage and Christians red with embarrassment" (275). The thing we can learn from the vendettas of John is that the very thing for which we are rejected becomes the treasure we must never

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give up. In the heat of controversy, names get called and our theology often becomes brittle and uncompromising. This was as true in biblical times as it is today.

Cahill shows us repeatedly that the biblical writers shared our human condition. Their authority derives from the witness they bore to a higher way. This is certainly true of the Gospel of John. Cahill allows that the difficulties of John's Gospel "are extreme enough that to this day Christian churches use its passages sparingly in their lectionaries" (273). Yet for all this, some of the most beautiful literature of the New Testament is found in the Johannine literature. "For God so loved the world that he gave away his only Son"; "I give you a new commandment: love one another"; "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him."

It is the Gospel of John that smuggles into the text the story of the woman caught in adultery. The early church did not forgive adultery. "The Great Church quickly became far more interested in discipline and order than Jesus had ever shown himself to be" (280). However, in the story of the woman caught in adultery we find the

same Jesus who tells us that hell is filled with those who

turned their backs on the poor and needy—the very people they were meant to help—but that no matter what the Church may have taught in the many periods of its long, eventful history, no matter what a given society may deem “sexual transgression,” . . . hell is not filled with those, who, for whatever reason, awoke in the wrong bed. Nor does he condemn us. (281)

Cahill ends his book where he began, back in Rome. This time, Cahill looks down from the Janiculum toward Trastevere, rather than the Vatican. Here is a small collection of buildings, once a cloistered Renaissance convent, today the center of the Community of Sant’Egidio. This is the heart of an ecumenical community of lay people, founded in 1968 by a handful of Roman high school students who decided during the revolutionary foment of the 1960s to do something revolutionary themselves. They wished to live in Trastevere, just as the early Christians had. They began to gather together every night to pray and read the Bible together, especially the Gospels.

Have the Gospels made a difference? Each night the community still meets for prayer and singing. In addition, “each night in Trastevere fifteen hundred homeless are fed, not in soup lines but in sit-down dinners, served with style and graciousness” (313). The Trastevere community also runs three refuges for old people, two AIDS hospices, and a home for abused and abandoned children. The list goes on and on.

Cahill leaves us with an important question, “How many Sant’Egidios would it take to transform the social fabric, not just of Trastevere, but also of earth itself?” (316).

Reading Cahill, I am again inspired to live the Jesus story. Cahill’s Jesus does not easily fit within the parameters of most denominational structures. If Jesus came to our churches today, we would most likely crucify him again. Jesus would certainly call into question our dealings with each other. The kind of care and forgiveness of others that Jesus demanded leaves little room for pointing the finger or getting back at those who hurt us. The community Jesus called for is the one in which all are invited, even ourselves on our worst days.

My review has focused on the central thesis of Cahill’s book. I will close by saying a few things about Cahill’s style of writing and his use of sources.

I am completely enamoured with Cahill the writer. Things I have heard all my life leapt from the Bible while reading his book. Here are a couple examples that brought smiles.

In reference to Jesus’ charge that one should pluck out one’s eye if tempted with lust, Cahill writes: “[Jesus] is not really urging that you should slice off your testicles to stop unwanted erections (though in the third century poor, humorless Origin taking this passage literally will do great harm to himself)” (83).

In a passage appropriate on April 15, as I write: “Between the angelic entrances and exits, [Luke] gives us Mary and Joseph trudging along the road to Bethlehem, unable to get out from under an inopportune tax problem (though tax problems are never opportune)” (98). Cahill’s writing is full of such vivid images.

As for his use of sources, Cahill uses few footnotes, but instead offers brief descriptions of sources at the end of each chapter. Cahill cannot easily be labeled as a member of any particular school of Jesus

Studies—other than to say that he steers clear not only of fundamentalists, who tend to lose sight of the human person, but also the Jesus Seminar people, who see Jesus as little more than a sage and wit. The interesting thing about Cahill is that he is willing to absorb a great deal of critical readings of the text, and the Jesus that emerges from his study is one that not only challenges the reader to greater service and care, but also calls forth devotion.

Cahill appears to have more Catholic than Protestant sensibility. He certainly is not a fundamentalist whose faith depends upon making the Bible a literal history—something it certainly is not. For the most part, I found this very refreshing. Protestantism tends toward either being steeped in emotion with little scholarly interest, or scholarly without a drop of devotion. Cahill brings both together.

At a couple places this approach is foreign to my own sensibilities. The first is when Cahill draws conclusions about Peter and Paul’s theology from descriptions of their personalities and appearances that have come down to us through tradition. Cahill admits to liberties he has taken in his readings at this point, but believes a kernel of historical truth is preserved in the tradition. The other example is Cahill’s rather extended discussion of the Shroud of Turin as confirming evidence of the resurrection.

In the end, however, I appreciate Cahill’s emphasis while discussing the miraculous life of Jesus: “to have been rendered sane, or healthy or living once more must, after all, have struck the individual so cured as an overwhelming proof of God’s personal care—a miracle for *me*” (212).

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