

## Books recount experiences of God, the lives of Jesus and Paul

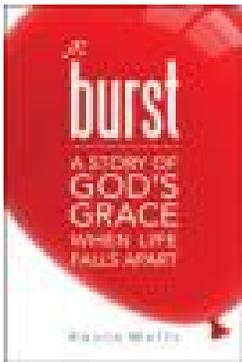
Diane Scharper | Nov. 4, 2011

### IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW: ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

By James L. Kugel

Published by Free Press, \$26

James L. Kugel, a Harvard Hebrew scholar, thought he felt the presence of God. Was this imagination fired by a fear of death as Kugel battled cancer? He didn't know. When the cancer went into remission, he decided to investigate mankind's experience of the supernatural. Blending history, literature and the Hebrew scriptures as well as Babylonian, Greek and Roman mythology, Kugel's book, *In the Valley of the Shadow*, puts together a composite picture of the divine as witnessed in human history. It also includes memoir-like reminiscences of Kugel's illness, prayers and spiritual insights. With its wide range of topics, the book can be somewhat confusing. But it's also informative. Kugel's thoughts about Israel's contribution of monotheism and the way this altered polytheistic concepts of God are especially noteworthy, as are his discussions of the Psalms and his insights concerning the problem of evil -- both natural disaster and human wrongdoing. He wonders, for instance, how an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God -- as seen in the Hebrew Bible -- can allow everything from a pinprick to the devastation of a tornado or a tsunami. Although Kugel offers no definitive answers, his engagingly written book provides much food for thought.



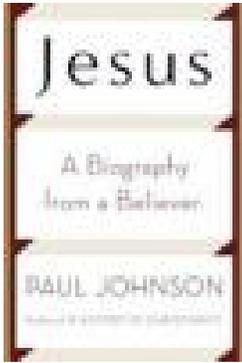
### BURST: A STORY OF GOD'S GRACE WHEN LIFE FALLS APART

By Kevin Wells

Published by Servant Books, \$14.99

Kevin Wells didn't just think he felt the presence of God. He knew he did. His memoir, *Burst*, describes his experience with an intracranial hemorrhage and the miracle that saved him. Although not officially designated a miracle, the healing event, which occurred in a Baltimore hospital in 2009, brought Wells back from the brink of death. Raised Roman Catholic, Wells is religious but not saintly. Although his uncle was a priest, Wells himself has no special credentials with the divine -- all of which adds authenticity to his unevenly written account. Wells tries to cram too much into this brief book that tends to lose its focus. He discusses nearly every aspect of his life, including his growing-up years in Catholic school, his college days, his writing career, meeting his wife, their marriage, their infertility problems and subsequent adoption of three children, as well as his uncle's murder and the trial of the suspect. Yet the account of Wells' brain hemorrhage and his subsequent

near-death experience -- with which this book begins and ends -- is so vivid that despite some loose writing, readers will be hooked.

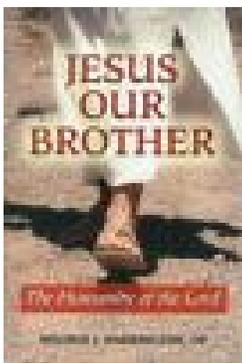


### JESUS: A BIOGRAPHY FROM A BELIEVER

By Paul Johnson

Published by Penguin, \$19.95

What was Jesus like as a person? Paul Johnson tries to answer that question in his book, *Jesus: A Biography from a Believer*, recently released in paperback. Johnson, a historian, bases his portrait of Jesus on the books of the New Testament because historical records of the time are scarce. He wants to understand Jesus' message, his life and personality, as well as the era in which he lived. At times, Johnson reads into the scriptural text -- as opposed to understanding it. Johnson, for example, sees Jesus as a poet and storyteller who thinks in images, flashes of insight, and metaphors. Readers, however, might ask whether Jesus himself had these tendencies or whether this was the writing style of the New Testament authors. Luke, for example, has a propensity for parables and John is known for his poetry. Yet all will agree with Johnson that Jesus' ultimate message was love of others. As Johnson aptly puts it, Jesus turned mankind's normal compassion for an individual person into a "huge, overarching gospel of love." As the subtitle suggests, Johnson's perspective is shaped by his belief in the validity of the documents of the New Testament. It is also shaped by Johnson's own credentials as a historian. Although the two don't always gel, Johnson offers an easy-to-read and often insightful look at his subject.



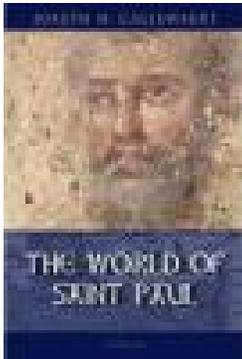
### JESUS OUR BROTHER: THE HUMANITY OF THE LORD

By Wilfrid J. Harrington, OP

Published by Paulist Press, \$14.95

Like Johnson, Dominican Fr. Wilfrid J. Harrington bases his book, *Jesus, Our Brother*, on the New Testament, but he relies primarily on Mark as his is the earliest Gospel. Instead of taking the text at face value as Johnson sometimes does, Harrington, a scripture scholar, notes the different approaches that the evangelists use and tries to see what these suggest about Jesus' nature. Overall, he says, Mark shows a more human side to Jesus while John highlights Jesus' divinity. Although Harrington includes both the divine and the human, his purpose is to find Jesus' "authentic humanity." The task, he says, is difficult because the Gospels were not biographies and were not trying to offer a historically accurate portrait. Harrington writes clearly and engagingly, focusing on

what Jesus taught, did and said as ways to understand his human nature. He shows Jesus as a social revolutionary who was a prophet, healer and teacher. He cared for the poor, the marginalized and the sinners. He had a sense of the closeness of God, but he also knew fear and anger and had little patience with legalism. Ultimately, Jesus preached a God of overwhelming kindness and, for his efforts, was punished in an overwhelmingly cruel manner -- by crucifixion. This is the irony of Jesus' life and the bottom line of Harrington's book, which isn't given to poetic interpretation as much as it is to insight.



### THE WORLD OF ST. PAUL

By Joseph M. Callewaert

Published by Ignatius Press, \$16.95

According to Joseph M. Callewaert, Antioch in A.D. 44 was "a permanent festival of vice" and had been since time immemorial. So how did St. Paul convert such large numbers of Gentiles and Jews, ultimately making the city the center of the early Christian church? The question informs Callewaert's *The World of St. Paul*. The book looks at Paul's mindset and his motivation as it provides context to Paul's accomplishments. Describing the geographical, historical and cultural aspects of the places where Paul preached, Callewaert provides details that suggest just how difficult Paul's job was. A tent-maker trained as a rabbi, Paul took what was merely a small cult and enabled it to grow into one of the world's most powerful and influential religions. Using Acts (and to a lesser extent Paul's epistles) as a backdrop, Callewaert reconstructs Paul's missionary journeys. His writing style, though informative, has few flourishes and, ironically, is somewhat reminiscent of Paul's comments (1 Corinthians 2:1-5) about his own style as quoted by Callewaert: "I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom." All of which suggests that while Paul may not have known Jesus as a person, he certainly knew Jesus as the source of divine inspiration.

[Diane Scharper is the author of several books, including *Radiant: Prayer Poems*. She teaches English at Towson University in Maryland.]

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