

DOUBTING THOMAS DESERVES BETTER REPUTATION

Another one of those biblical characters who deserve a better fate is Jesus' disciple Thomas. People insist on calling him "doubting Thomas." For centuries he has been characterized as an overly skeptical, untrusting sort of fellow.

It's easy to understand how he got that lopsided reputation. In the Christian scriptures, near the end of the Gospel of John, is the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

The middle of the 20th chapter tells how he appeared to his followers, after returning from the grave, as they are hiding in a locked room. But one of his men, Thomas of course, is not with the group at the time.

Later that week the news catches up with him. But Thomas isn't buying such an implausible story sight unseen. "I can't believe that," he says, "unless I see him in person, scars and all." So from then on he's been tagged "doubting Thomas."

What a waste. The man has more going for him than that, but for all practical purposes he's been remembered as little more than the original man from Missouri. So let's set the record straight.

Everything worth knowing about Thomas is in John's gospel. He's mentioned in the other accounts, but only as a name in a list of the twelve disciples. John's gospel notes that he is also called "the Twin."

But nobody has ever been able to figure out who his twin brother or sister was. (One spurious early Christian tradition supposed that Thomas and Jesus were twins! But that's nothing more than pious poppycock.)

Two other incidents in Thomas' career paint a more flattering picture. John 11 contains the account of how Jesus miraculously restores his friend Lazarus from the grave. When he originally receives the news of Lazarus' terminal illness, Jesus dillydallies at his camp east of the Jordan River.

A few days later, against the advice of his men, he decides to visit Lazarus' home in the suburbs of Jerusalem. That is risky. For on several occasions his enemies tried to ambush him there. The one disciple brave enough to challenge the odds is Thomas. "Let's all go along," he offers, "and if need be we can die

with him." Chalk one up for Thomas.

Several chapters (and some weeks) later, Jesus and his men are again in Jerusalem for a national holiday. Their supper together, as it turns out, is their last meal before Jesus' arrest and eventual execution. So Jesus spends the hours after dinner sharing some thoughts about his impending departure, trying to comfort his men in advance of their ordeal.

Again, according to John 14, it is Thomas who raises a crucial question. "We don't know where you're going," he insists, "so how can we know the way to follow you?" That is Jesus' cue to begin his sermon on "the way, the truth, and the life."

In any event, on this occasion Thomas comes off looking like a concerned and perceptive student.

Furthermore, returning to the John 20 post-resurrection incident, it is actually "doubting" Thomas who gets one of the best lines in the whole book. For on the next weekend, as Jesus appears to his men again, Thomas is in the group.

When Jesus confronts him with the nail- and spear-hole evidence of his crucifixion and resurrection, Thomas responds with, "My Lord and my God!" Which is about the most religious thing spoken by anyone other than Jesus in the entire book.

Put it all together and Thomas comes out smelling like a rose. He's brave, perceptive, inquisitive, and ultimately lavish in his religious devotion. Add thrifty and true and he could have been a Boy Scout.

Obviously the author of the Gospel of John was more interested in establishing the credentials of Jesus as the Son of God than he was in sketching the character of Thomas as a model disciple.

On the other hand, many skeptical modern readers may be unimpressed with the book's religious claims. Either way, the glimpses we get into the personality of one figure in the drama are revealing.

In this case "doubting" Thomas comes off looking a lot better than his nickname would suggest. That probably says more about the fickleness of history than it does about the man himself.