



# Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve

*Tom Bissell*

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## **Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve** Tom Bissell

A profound and moving journey into the heart of Christianity that explores the mysterious and often paradoxical lives and legacies of the Twelve Apostles—a book both for those of the faith and for others who seek to understand Christianity from the outside in.

Peter, Matthew, Thomas, John: Who were these men? What was their relationship to Jesus? Tom Bissell provides rich and surprising answers to these ancient, elusive questions. He examines not just who these men were (and weren't), but also how their identities have taken shape over the course of two millennia.

Ultimately, Bissell finds that the story of the apostles *is* the story of early Christianity: its competing versions of Jesus's ministry, its countless schisms, and its ultimate evolution from an obscure Jewish sect to the global faith we know today in all its forms and permutations. In his quest to understand the underpinnings of the world's largest religion, Bissell embarks on a years-long pilgrimage to the supposed tombs of the Twelve Apostles. He travels from Jerusalem and Rome to Turkey, Greece, Spain, France, India, and Kyrgyzstan, vividly capturing the rich diversity of Christianity's worldwide reach. Along the way, he engages with a host of characters—priests, paupers, a Vatican archaeologist, a Palestinian taxi driver, a Russian monk—posing sharp questions that range from the religious to the philosophical to the political.

Written with warmth, empathy, and rare acumen, *Apostle* is a brilliant synthesis of travel writing, biblical history, and a deep, lifelong relationship with Christianity. The result is an unusual, erudite, and at times hilarious book—a religious, intellectual, and personal adventure fit for believers, scholars, and wanderers alike.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## **Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve Details**

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# From Reader Review *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve* for online ebook

**Michael Carlson says**

In this provocative "tour" of the burial sites of the Twelve Apostles (plus Paul and Jesus), Bissell does not (quite) recover the faith he lost as a teenager. In fact, many of his (negative) views about Christianity are strengthened. While I might have wished otherwise--and while I disagree with many of his interpretations of texts and traditions--I found this a valuable and interesting book.

A point I'd make (which Bissell does not) is that it seems that many ancient non-Roman Catholic Christian communities honored the remains of apostles they claimed were interred there as a protest against the Peter-centered version of Christianity in Rome. "Our saint was also one of the Twelve! His voice and our traditions are just as ancient and revered as Peter's!"

A very good read.

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**Mike says**

What a strange, impressive, infuriating book this is.

As I see it, Tom Bissell's *Apostle* has three audiences, and those parts of the book that gratify one may well aggravate the other two. There's the Bissell fans, the people who enjoy Bissell's voice and sensibility and will follow his writing wherever it leads. (Put me in that camp.) There's the travel literature readers, who want to experience all the textures of an unseen landscape. And there's biblical scholars, seeking a rigorous analysis of the lives of the twelve apostles. I don't know how much overlap there is among those three groupings, how many people are going to find themselves in the center of that interlocking Venn diagram.

For my part, my admiration for Bissell's storytelling (the chapters concerning his trips to Israel, India, and Kyrgyzstan are highlights) was matched only by my frustration at the bewildering passages dealing with the apostles themselves. "Anyone who does not find Christianity interesting has only his or her unfamiliarity with the topic to blame," writes Bissell. Fair enough. But not finding wonky exegesis of the quasi-historical/literary/religious traditions of the lives of twelve men with multiple names, fluid identities, and questionable historical reality interesting is another matter. My interest in the personal/travel sections of *Apostle* dwarfed my interest in the sections on the apostles themselves, which I admit I began to skim a little halfway through the text. (Similarly, I imagine serious students of early Christianity reading *Apostle* and wondering: *I just wanted to know about the formation of the Cult of Thomas in India in the first century CE; why exactly am I being treated to this dude's gastrointestinal difficulties?*)

It's been many years, but I don't remember this schism being a problem in Bissell's much earlier book *Chasing the Sea*. In that book, Bissell's memoir of returning to Uzbekistan after many years was deftly intertwined with an engaging history of the Soviet project to drain the Aral Sea, and I never became bored. *Apostle* is a major achievement, many years in the making and with a lot to recommend about it, but it ultimately left me cold and dissatisfied.

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## Walt says

Having soldiered through 370 pages of text, I have to wonder how a lapsed Catholic received the funds to go jaunting around the world looking for the tombs of the apostles. The reader receives a clue in his chapter on Andrew. He won an award to live in a mansion in Rome and write. After some months of living in Rome, he grabs his roomie and they decide to visit Corinth to see the tomb of St. Andrew. The book reads like one part history, one part religion, and one part philosophy all seen through the lens of a guy who is fortunate, or talented, enough to win an award to live in Rome for a year free of charge and do whatever.

I learned a lot from this book; but I did not enjoy it. I did not like it. Bissell does not bother me that he is a lapsed Catholic writing about Catholicism. He bothers me that he frequently reminds his audience that he is a lapsed Catholic. So, why the pilgrimage? The answer is in the title: "Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve." He probably received a nice advance on the book and enjoyed travel. Through this lens, readers can see the frustration of the priest in Rome when Bissell asks him 'how important are Philip and James? How do you celebrate them?' In Jerusalem, he asks a random Palestinian shepherd 'what do you know about Judas Iscariot?' The simplicity of these types of questions make Bissell look condescending while at the same time conveying his bewilderment that people place any importance on the Apostles. I am reminded of David Letterman walking New York and asking random people if they want to buy gum. Letterman thought it was funny. Or, Matt Taibbi visiting Republican gatherings with the intention of taping people on film in their stupidity. Bissell fits snugly between them.

There is not much known about the Apostles except through religious books. Bissell does an admirable job in discussing the religious texts, comparing and contrasting, and offering some perspectives on more modern experts. The ultimate lack of historical records on the Apostles leads to the conclusion, that just about any and all stories repeated in the original texts could be, and likely are, fictional. The chapter on Simon the Canannite and Thaddeus even focuses on the use of metaphors and allegory in the Gospels.

The travel commentary is a crucial part of the book. Bissell cleverly uses this commentary to break up the dryer parts of the book. Many reviewers were not too pleased to read about him harassing young lovers in Toulouse to ask them their opinions about the church in front of which they were kissing. I used these interludes of fluff to consider the meat and potatoes of the book. Like most reviewers, the travel commentary was worthless to me: 'Jerusalem is a divided city; I got drunk in Patras; I got diarrhea in India; and faced down children in India; I had fun in Kyrgyzstan.' None of that helped me understand Judas Iscariot, St. Andrew, St. Thomas, or St. Matthew. What was interesting to me is that the only thing "known" about Judas Iscariot was that he purchased a place known as the Field of Blood; but Bissell could not determine if the place had that name before or after Iscariot died.

Overall, I cannot recommend this book. Although readers can learn a little about the Apostles, that information is buried in chapters of fluff. Some of the chapters drone on and on. Bissell spent a lot of time discussing Simon Peter. He barely mentioned St. James (of Santiago Campostella fame). In fact, the book really just suddenly ended with a few pages on St. James. It was as if Bissell said 'I got 370 pages, I'm done.' It is a conclusion that I can easily expect from someone who has a jaundiced view towards the subject matter. His social skills and fearlessness may be somewhat amusing; but they did not appear to help him in his quest.

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## Sophia Jones says

This book has a lot of three-star reviews, which makes me sad, since I really enjoyed it. The book is part travelogue, of the author's visits to various shrines and part history, as he covers the different stories and controversies surrounding various apostles. People expecting the book to be fully one thing or the other will be disappointed, but I loved the combination and felt it was well balanced, though a little more info on his travels would have been nice. The real weakness here is Bissell's disregard for religion. He is in no way disrespectful, but his disbelief can sometimes come off as harsh as he commentates on people believing in impossible things. I'm not saying he has to be religious, but he didn't share the sense of wonder other travelers did and that impacted his story telling quite a bit. On the other hand, Bissell's disbelief means he has no qualms about digging into non-canonical gospels and folk traditions, which was wonderful. If you are particularly rigid in your religious views, this is not the book for you, but if you want to learn about the evolution of Christianity, where the apostles' relics are kept and why they still have such a strong hold on our culture, then this is the book for you.

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## James (JD) Dittes says

Quite some time ago I picked up the theological travelogue, *In Search of the Birth of Jesus: The Real Journey of the Magi* by Paul William Roberts (1995). Along with remarkable insights into the cultures of the Levant (it was the first time I had learned of the Yazhidi who faced genocide in recent years by ISIS), Roberts wielded some unique takes on the Bible that I hadn't encountered before, despite being a lifelong Christian.

I'm happy to report that Tom Bissell pulls off a similar trick with *Apostle*, tracing journeys to sites as farflung as India and Kyrgyzstan and sharing insights from a deep well of research he had done along the way.

Bissell served as an altar boy, but today his engagement with scriptures is more out of fascination than faith. It makes him an interesting guide to the apostles, if not their resting places, because he draws from sources beyond the Bible, including those in the first centuries of the Christian Era who discussed the characters and texts with authority.

What emerges is a lively look at the earliest decades of the Christian movement in which the phrase "in one accord" was hardly the case, even though Luke tried to describe the community thusly in Acts. There were Jewish Christians, led by Jesus' brothers James, Simon (the zealous) and Jude (Thaddeus)--the ideas in parentheses are discussed by Bissell--who insisted on keeping the seventh-day Sabbath and eating vegetarian or kosher diets. There were Gentile-oriented Christians. Others spent centuries parsing over exactly *how* divine or human Christ was. Was it 80-20? 50-50? Ultimately the Council of Nicea compromised on a 100%-100% split.

Bissell sums up his research on pages 352: "[Christianity] is and will always be an argument about the past and the future.... [This argument] will emerge over and over again, with different parties wearing similar masks, for every spiritually engaged community is forced to confront the inevitability of newly arisen beliefs and the drifting tectonic plates of assumed morality."

Some of Bissell's travels are a bit of a stretch. Why he pursues Matthew in Kyrgyzstan is a mystery to me, other than ties that he had to the region from his days in the Peace Corps. The two chapters that visit resting

places of two apostles reveal very little about the cities and the churches there.

Still, for those who are theologically inclined, Bissell's book is really cool. In my library I have William Steuart McBirnie's *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, a more straightforward account of the fates of Christ's first followers than Bissell's circumspect one. I'm glad that Bissell was willing to follow the footsteps of other Christian scholars and explore new catacombs where the history of Christianity lies buried, waiting for rediscovery.

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## Marius says

domi, bet nevienalyt? ir keistoka knyga. Autorius stengiasi išs?d?ti net ne ant dviej?, bet ant trijų tabure?i? vienu metu. Ir tai jau?iasi.

Tom Bissell užsibr?ž? papasakoti apie vien? esmini? krikš?ionyb?s ir jos istorijos dalyk? - dvylika apaštal?. Jis aplank? daugum? j? tikro ar tariamo palaidojimo viet?, band? iš istorini? ir religini? šaltini? atsekti ir atkurti j? biografijas, suprasti, kas jie, k? nuveik?, kaip j? gyvenimas paveik? krikš?ionyb?, kaip j? pa?i? asmenybė? suvokimas keit?si b?gant laikui.

Viena knygos dalis - tai k? Tom Bissell moka gerausiai - žurnalistinis tyrimas ir kelioni? literat?ra, yra puiki ir beveik be priekaišt?. Autorius lanko apaštal? paskutinio poilsio vietas (Indija, Kirgizija, Turkija, Roma, Graikija ir t.t.), gyvai ir su humoru aprašo tuos kraštus, susitikimus su šventas vietas lankan?iais žmon?mis, pastangas suprasti j? tik?jim?.

Kita knygos dalis - ankstyvosios krikš?ionyb?s, jos pradžios, formavimosi istorija. Išd?styta per dvylikos apaštal? gyvenimo istorij?, per naujojo Testamento istorij?.

Tre?ioji knygos dalis - ankstyvosios krikš?ioni? teologijos formavimasis, jos kontraversijos, gin?ai ir disputai.

Šios dvi dalys, nors autorius ir stengiasi to išvengti, gana mokslin?s ir šiek tiek sausokos, tad bus tikrai domios tik krikš?ionyb?s istorija besidomintiems žmon?ms (nors k? gali žinoti - autorius stengiasi pa?vairinti pasakojim? ?variais istoriniais anekdotais ir domyb?mis).

Aišku, tos pastangos suderinti tris dalykus kartais išmuša iš v?ži? - pvz. nuo pasakojimo apie apaštal? Tom? pereinama prie autoriaus viduri? problem? Indijoje ir tie du naratyvai greta atrodo komiškai (labiau nety?ia negu ty?ia). Tiesa, autoriaus garbei reikt? pasteb?ti, kad pigi? triuk? jis stengiasi išvengti. O autoriaus negarbei reikia pasteb?ti, kad kelioni? dalis nepalyginamai gyvesn? už ilgus puslapius sp?lioni? ir svarstym?, kuris apaštalas kuris i rkod?l taip nutiko ir kaip keit?si j? vardai, ir kokia t? vard? genez? - kaip pvz. nesupainioti Šv. Judo Tado su Judu Iskarijotu. :)

Kad ir kaip ten b?t?, knyga gali tapti paskata giliau pasidom?ti ankstyv?ja krikš?ionybe ar apaštal? gyvenimu - tam ir pridodamas literat?ros s?rašas pagalb?ja.

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## Holly says

So Tom Bissell has been doing more than playing video games these last few years (he wrote a book on 'why video games matter,' which I can't see myself ever wanting to read). I was impressed with the staggering amount of research he has absorbed on the apostles and early Christianity. He's a former Catholic altar boy and now a non-believer, but is interested in history, myth, relics and tombs, and, obviously, narrow doctrinal and theological disputes. These are all things that I, too, want to read about, without snuck-in doses of proselytization or apologetics! So I felt like a fellow traveler with Bissell - I learned new things and remembered things I had once learned and forgotten. In some ways reading this felt like a 2016 update to a

terrific undergraduate class on the New Testament that I had the privilege of taking from Ron Farmer in the early 1990s.

I will say, though, that Bissell's dense pages of information sometimes read like a regurgitation of all this research. Not in the sense of the P word, because it was probably in his own words, but he often gets sounding very scholarly but never uses endnotes. And some of it wasn't so reader friendly and I felt the urge to skim, but didn't because it's my choice to read this after all. I am ready for the Bible-trivia pub quiz.

And because the book seemed so comprehensive (though of course it isn't; the number of books written on early Christianity fills entire libraries), I was a little surprised by a few omissions:

- Though he discusses the textual criticism and redaction criticism of the synoptic gospels in great detail, he never mentions or explains Q source.
- Though he discusses heresies, fringe sects of first-century Palestine, and Gnostic texts as they become important to each apostle's story, he doesn't discuss the Qumran community of Essenes.
- Though he discusses the many Marys of the NT, he never explores the idea of Mary Magdalene as apostle. These are all missed opportunities, I think, especially the last.

Bissell isn't afraid to use adjectives and adverbs liberally (peregrinative piety, say) even when they are strange (a Niagarically massive waterfall), but I love adjectives and adverbs, so I enjoyed those. He's frequently funny, though you have to wade through a few hundred pages before he allows the humor to emerge, little bombs like "He was either a Greek Orthodox priest or the Prince of Darkness's personal assistant." The juxtapositioning of the information-downloads with the humor and travel accounts was usually abrupt, though I got used to it more in the later chapters where he began incorporating a lot more of the travel narratives. Not sure why, except that perhaps these trips were more important to him, more recent, and more eventful, such as his gastrointestinal problems when in Chennai, India (which was really funny to read, albeit with pained sympathy). His final trip is to the tomb of James at Catedral de Santiago de Compostela, and Bissell decides to cut his account short, which was frustrating (perhaps for another book to come?), but at least it reminded me to read the book of his travel companion, Gideon Lewis-Kraus (*A Sense of Direction*, 2012).

All in all, very impressive book. Not a fast read, but rewarding for the time it demands.

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## **Leanne says**

This is an absolutely fabulous book! Organized like many great travel books, it is personal travel based on a historical quest. In this case, the author's travels to visit the tombs of the twelve apostles. I could read hundreds of "in the footsteps of" travel books and never grow tired—and this one is no exception. It is great! First of all, he is a very good writer. Second of all, in the book he takes up the challenge of explaining some of the fairly mind-bendingly complicated theology of the early church. Think Council of Nicaea etc. He does a great job here. His explanations are easy to understand and fun to read.

Where he falls down in my opinion is actually in the travel writing section. I recently read a wonderful book organized like this one, called *Walking to Canterbury*. In that book, all the people whom the author meets on the road are treated with enormous respect. In fact, you could say that is the point. Somehow, the author of *Walking to Canterbury* creates these multi-dimensional "fellow travelers" who hold a lot of interest in terms of character. It is pretty uplifting to read the compassionate and respectful way he paints their portraits for the reader. In contrast, Tom Bissell treats everyone as a kind of caricature (where only he comes out looking



good). There are the Indians... with their quirky dialogue and his imaginings of the "dirty hovels" they live in and the French man, who surely lives all alone in an alcohol infused dismal apartment; there are the goth teens who care and know nothing... it is a bit of a drag to read caricature on top of caricature and you wonder why he imagines things the way he does—this is not fiction. And I have yet to see American tourists as beautifully dressed and yet vacuous in the way he describes. Everyone is treated with a kind of snide condescension. This is not a novel after all (and if it was, his characters still are awful!)

But anyway, that is a smaller point, and I do congratulate him for keeping his own skeletons in the closet; for refreshingly this book does not have a personal psychological component—hallelujah, if he had a bad childhood, we don't know. He could have kept his faith commitment (he is actually a non-believer) quiet but the way he explains his own interest (Catholic childhood) makes it all the more interesting.

There is also a chapter of Christology that is extremely well done. And yet in this book of tomb visits, why did he fail to visit the most fascinating tomb of all (Holy Sepulcher Golgotha—if he wrote the chapter on "Christos" as he called the chapter, he could have delved into that tomb as well). Why didn't he? That is an amazing story that should have been in a book like this—as I would argue, with the possible exception of Thomas in India, it is the only truly interesting story of a tomb (history of the Church of Holy Sepulcher is absolutely fascinating). The other tombs are not all that interesting, in my opinion.

(I also didn't appreciate all the details of his stomach travails in India--too much information!! SHEESH!)

And speaking of India, he is great on the Malabar Christians. Less great on Toulouse, where there are more disparaging caricatures and clichés—like that of the Middle Ages being one of dark ages and the disconnect with the great Gothic Cathedrals. Or of Saint Severin Basilica being built “for tourists.” Indeed, as strong as he is on early church history, I guess I could venture he is as weak on the Middle Ages.

The book is fabulous—read it for sure. It inspired me to re-read a favorite history book of mine called, *The Lost History of Christianity*—now that is a five star book! (Silk Roaders will love it!)  
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/3...>

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## **Al Bità says**

Superbly elegant writing from Bissell is augmented by top-notch production values from Pantheon in the production of this book. Well done to everyone involved!

Bissell uses the literary device of providing a framework consisting of a 21st-c tour through some sites (not all of them) which are shrines and places of pilgrimage related in one way or another to the apostles of Jesus known as “the Twelve” and which are still extant to this day.

One of the intriguing elements of this journey is the fact that these places still exist and that many flourish as places of continued pilgrimage and reverence. The intrigue stems from the fact that as a rule the majority of these “twelve” have little if any references in the traditional four gospels of the New Testament (NT) where they are first mentioned — and these twelve are not as open-and-shut cases when it comes to their actual identities anyway... What we have here are not matters either of history or of theology, but matters of Faith

based on varying and sometimes contradictory folklores and legends built up over the ages.

Essentially Bissell concentrates on the “agreed” traditional list of the Twelve apostles; their biblical mentions and the variant versions of their subsequent histories are considered honestly and authoritatively from within the context of their “development” over the centuries. In the process, the reader is painlessly informed about the historical and theological concerns, particularly of the first 600 year or so of the development of Christianity — a subject of immense complexity and fascination.

The book is presented in twelve chapters, but the Twelve Apostles are covered in only ten of these chapters. Separate chapters are provided: one for coverage of Paul’s significance in all this (it should be remembered that Paul was probably the first to call himself an apostle (the word means “messenger” or “one sent forth” and Paul was indeed the one sent forth to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul’s authentic epistles are the *earliest* writings of the NT; also, by the early 60s CE, James, Peter and Paul were all dead, at least a decade before the gospels of the NT (and therefore before the first listings of the “twelve”) began to appear); the other for coverage of the concept of *Christos* or “The Christ” insofar as Jesus is concerned (the theological battles regarding the nature of Jesus over 300 years culminating in the final “official” declaration of his Godhead as part of the Holy Trinity was not finalised until the Third Council of Constantinople in 681 CE. Personally I cannot help but think that the arguments, stemming from the early 4th-c CE, could have had a significant impact on Muhammad, stimulating him to reject the Trinity concept altogether and revert to the “one god” (the “Allah”) concept central to Islam).

Despite these turbulent times, the individual cults associated with the Twelve managed to survive and flourish, not so much in their supposed place of origin (Palestine) but more fruitfully in foreign soils near and far away, stretching right across and throughout the Roman/Byzantine Empire. Go figure.

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## Louise says

The author spent three years visiting the supposed and disputed resting sites of each apostle. While the author is a journalist and not a scholar, he is well versed in exegetical issues, theology, and early church history. His scholarly commentary is punctuated by highly entertaining travel writing.

For each apostle, the academic issues are given along with the author’s trips from Israel (Judas) to Italy (Bartholomew, Philip, James, Peter) to Greece (Andrew), Turkey (John), India (Thomas), France (Simon), Kyrgyzstan (Matthew) and Spain (James) in search of the tombs.

Through the academics the reader gets pages of etymology, possible genealogies, information on the early Christian sects (Sethians, Nestorians Ebonites to name a few) and discussions of disputes on source material and theological issues. There is a flood of information on particulars such as Jesus’s “most beloved disciple” – was it John?; design of “pilgrimage churches”; the spread of Andrew’s bones; on Jesus’s brothers, etc. He shows how the Bible’s dearth of information on these men can be contradictory and how the text has been interpreted and/or “harmonized” over the centuries.

The travel portions are among the best of the genre. He writes of the getting to the site, the look of the surrounding area, the maintenance (or lack of), conversations with cab drivers and other tourists, priests, “curators” (custodians of relics?) and the general feel of anything he sees that relates to the apostle and/or the site’s history. I loved the woman in Kirgizstan who said she couldn’t speak of the monastery, only a priest

could talk about it.

The first chapter, on Judas, is a good example of the depth and pace of this unusual narrative. Bissell cites the many and contradictory portrayals of Judas in scholarship, art and fiction (evil, penitent, tragic, tormented, possessed, confused, loving, committer of fratricide, diseased and more) that have been derived from a mere 22 mentions in the Bible. He gives background on the gospels and compares their presentation of Judas and his betrayal. He discusses the scriptural conflict of how Judas died: Acts says he “burst open and died” on Hakeldama -The Field of Blood - and Matthew says he hung himself. He notes that Judas may have bought this field with the money from the betrayal and other aspects of the betrayal story.

Side by side with the academic is the travelogue with insight into the current status of this supposed grave site - in this case -Hakeldama. The signs of the conflict in Israel are everywhere. Barbed wire and a separating wall are visible from this vacant and barren Field. Bissell and his companion see two children, sheep and a shepherd wearing blue jeans and a wind breaker. The shepherd waves and they speak. They ask if many people visit this site. The shepherd say some days 2 people visit, some days none. It is hard to interpret but he seems to want their help in his divided house (2 houses?) that may have been shot at or taken by the Israelis. Silwan, an Arab neighborhood is down the road from the Field, is currently being “settled” by Israelis (with one settlement named for Jonathan Pollard!). In further visits to other sites on this trip, the image of contemporary divided Israel are noted, most sadly as the cab driver tries to find unblocked roads to get to the Garden of Gethsemane.

This book will please few readers. The academic reader while reading the summation of sources on Thomas (and perhaps Mary) in India will not be happy to read of the author’s digestive problems in India or that the “Santhome Basilica was the single cleanest thing I had seen in India this side of Domino’s Pizza bathroom porcelain” (p.253). The travel reader will be turned off plowing through 3 pages of intricate etymology before re-joining Bissell on his travels. A book like this should appeal to believers which Bissell is not (he says so up front), but, while most of the book is even handed, there are parts when he goes overboard with needling descriptions that challenge faith. The last chapter could outright offend.

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## **Hadrian says**

This books wears its topics like a man wears three hats. It is a travelogue about the author’s visits to the tombs and reliquaries of the twelve Apostles, an overview of the history of early Christianity, and an explanation of the disputes and controversies in early Christian theology.

The author is a lapsed Catholic since adolescence, and he only alludes to why he set out upon this journey and why he covered this topic. He meets with defenders of the faith, monks, and other pilgrims, and delves deep into theological research and textual analysis - where this topic is concerned, the textual origins of words (or letters) could challenge the faith of millions. I enjoyed hearing about Monophysites and Nestorians, though I wonder if everybody does, or has the time to.

His travelogue is charming, sometimes irreverent or oversharing - my god, must we hear about your stomach pains in Chennai? Why does he call the old ladies in a Russian church 'blobby'? But, I can say that he is unfiltered in his observations. I get the feeling of honesty from it. When he goes along the pilgrimage Route of Santiago de Compostela, and he asks *why* he does not believe when others do, *why* he feels nothing - that is an honest investigation into faith. That, my believing friends tell me, is the point of faith begins.

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### **Steve Bomgaars says**

Bissell is a former Catholic. He left the church in his late teens. However, he definitely has a passion for the early days of Christianity. He takes the reader on an historic ride through the years immediately after the death of Christ and beyond. All in all Bissell gives us insight to the lives of the apostles by looking not only at the Bible but historic texts, apocrypha texts, oral tradition etc. The end product is a very readable book about how Christianity was spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Bissell actually travelled to the "supposed" final resting place of all of the apostles....which makes for some interesting travel narrative as well.

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### **Mark says**

Like Tom Bissell, I am a nonbeliever, who finds the study of early Christianity fascinating. This book is for believers and nonbelievers alike though, because it is not religious criticism, but a highly enjoyable historical travelogue. Each of the twelve apostles gets his own chapter, plus there is a chapter on Paul, the apostle "not of the twelve," and one on the historical Jesus. Bissell spent over four years, traveling to the resting places of all twelve apostles and their relics. He also engages pilgrims he finds on his travels, which makes for some interesting and often humorous conversations. Thanks to Bissell's research and intelligence, we get not only a glimpse at the apostles, but a real view of the very beginnings of Christianity.

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### **Jerry Rocha says**

The best book on faith I've read. The story of each supposed resting place of the twelve is as fascinating and puzzling as religion itself. Many genuinely funny and heartbreaking moments happen throughout the book. As someone who only vaguely remembers the parts of the bible I had to read the few times I went to church, I wasn't as lost as I feared I'd be while reading Apostle. A great read no matter if you don't believe in a thing or are the type of person who whips themselves with a belt to punish the shame of masturbating.

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### **Ani says**

2.5 stars rounded up. This book was awkward to read because it was trying to be 3 different genres at once: travel diary, a history of Christianity, and commentary on religion. But, I powered through because the parts about the author's travels were charming. It was a noble adventure, but spoiled by his chip on his shoulder about his religious beliefs...or lack thereof

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