

# THE Joshua

P H E N O M E N O N

...Jonathan Seagull was born to be an instructor, and his own way of demonstrating love was to give something of the truth that he had seen to a gull who asked only a chance to see truth for himself.

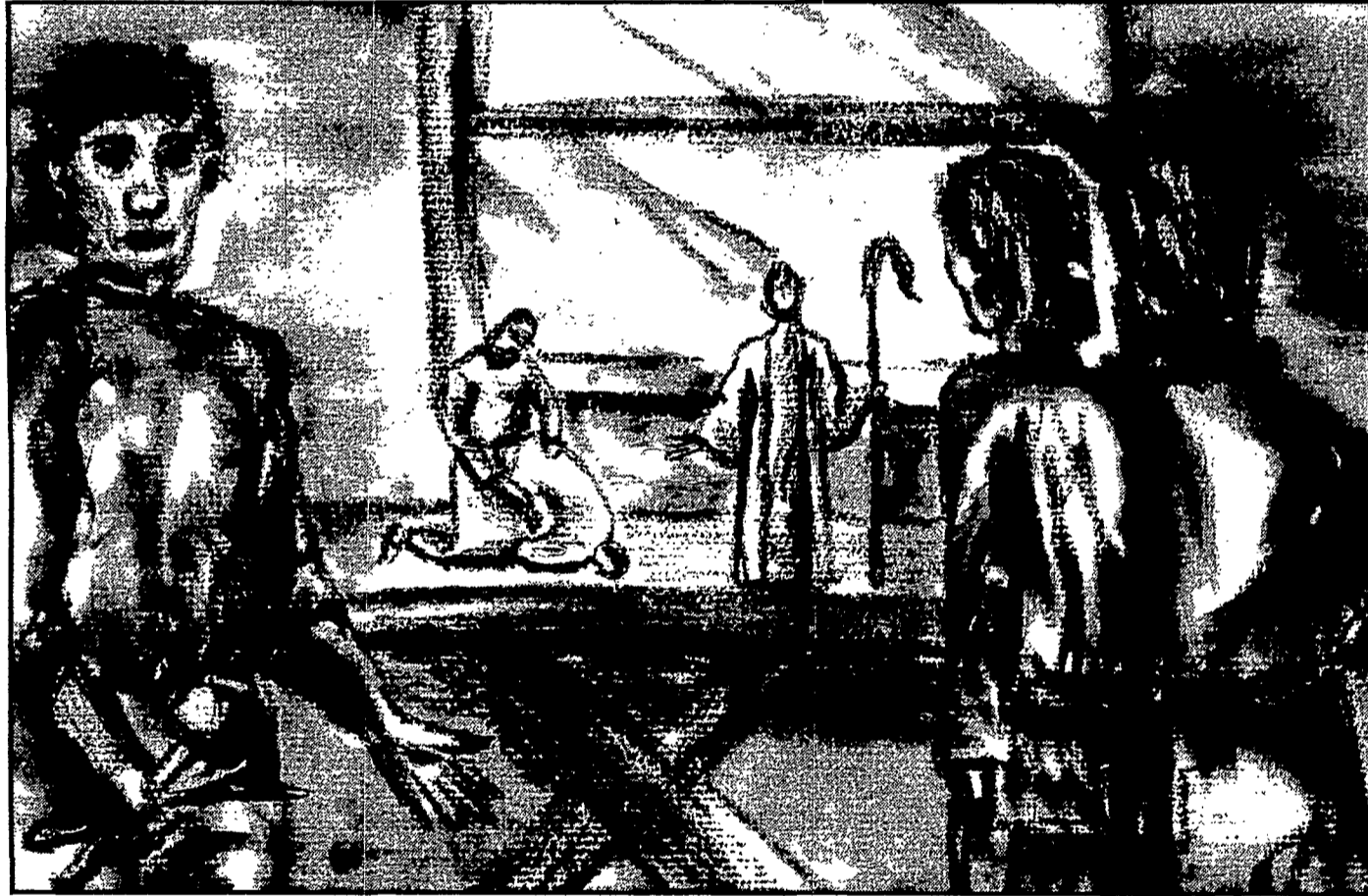
Jonathan Livingston Seagull  
by Richard Bach

By Clarence Aman  
Guest contributor

I was prepared to dislike Joshua, book and character. Reports indicated it might be one more mischievously seductive exercise in ultra-liberal "bishop-bashing," and I feared it might become a testament of radical rebellion posing as a modest liberal view.

Yet once I had read the book, I found myself amply surprised. "Joshua" did not totally please me, but it proved me wrong enough in premature judgment to warrant further meditation on its "parable," and its gentle and not so gentle urgings.

Part of my early antipathy toward the novel was derived from the prodigious "suspension of disbelief" normally demanded by allegories that bring Christ-figures into a modern setting. Few authors have been successful in such efforts. Myles Connolly's *Mr. Blue* hove back into memory as one. And, despite its unorthodoxy, the later *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* thoroughly impressed me back in 1973, in the thoughtful "theology" Richard Bach managed to jam into its scant 127 pages. I recommend both these novels to



the reader who finds Joshua intriguing. The comparative study should prove interesting to the student of Christ-figures in literature.

What, then, about "Joshua?"

Told in a disarmingly simple and uncluttered style, the text is eminently readable. It's good, straightforward prose — no subtle tricks, no hazy foreshadowing, no involuted syntax, no obfuscating diction. Father Girzone's paragraphs are shaped of ordinary but sinewy words. His writing bears no hint of the writing wiles of a Joyce or Faulkner, none of the long elaborate sentencings of a Melville or James. Father Girzone writes in a simple, forthright, unadulterated essay style, one that will send readers to concentrate on story and content, to measure the tale's merit. Such a focus on substance may have occurred by design, and works well here. Father Girzone promises future novels about clerics, which may show more writing sophistication, but not one hopes, at the price of Joshua's muscle.

Deceptively simple, "Joshua's" story is that of a gentle woodcarver of middle years who suddenly appears in a country town to mystify and stir the inhabitants. Even before the author makes it almost too clear that this is Christ — not just a Christ-figure like Mr. Blue or Jonathan Livingston Sea-

gull — the reader hopes not to be disappointed in that daring expectation. Can the author bring it off?

In an appealing stroke of good judgment and temperance, Girzone does bring it off, through a deft exercise of underselling. At first I was perplexed by the author's seeming ambivalence early in the story. Is this really Christ-come-back, or is he rather a Billy Budd counterpart, only richly symbolic? It was as if the author was playfully toying with the reader, letting him or her come to a personal decision before making Joshua's identity clear deeper in the narration.

That narration evolves to a clearer and clearer certainty through Joshua's soft-spoken reiteration of Christ's own biblical pronouncements and his self-effacing but virile actions, which carry beyond the natural realm. Joshua not only reiterates the dicta of Scripture; he works miracles. Quietly and unobtrusively, but with delicate emphasis and drama, he heals and corrects with a modest flair, and lets us accept.

Everything Joshua is called upon to do represents the gentle strength of Christ. His easy, graceful, tolerant disposition toward his "disciples" is totally Christian and fully complementary of the Judaic tradition as well. He does not become impatient with the common-folk of the town, who profess far too strenuously how little they know about him.

This points up one of the annoying elements that mar Father Girzone's narrative. Over and over again, he tells us that Joshua is mysterious, an enigma

to his fellow citizens. Thus, when it becomes abundantly clear that Joshua is exactly what he seems to be — an uncomplicated, open, totally genuine Christian male, whom the townsfolk may be unable to fully identify but whom they surely can recognize as a role model to be emulated, a man baring his soul at every challenge and advising all to "go, and do likewise" — the reader must ask, "Why do the citizens find him such a mystery?"

The answer seems to be that Joshua lacks the veneer of secular sophistication reflected among even the dullest of the citizenry. Unlike the townsfolk, Joshua is not schooled to the ways of the world. Amid this preoccupation with material values, such virtue as Joshua's becomes unpalatable "caviar."

Joshua's value system is clearly defined by his response to the tasks he is called to perform. A wood-carver who fashions beautiful artifacts out of nothing but rough-hewn logs, he creates two statues of Peter that reflect a seeming contradiction of dispositions in this founding "rock" of the modern church. Moreover, a masterful statue of Moses commissioned for the synagogue effects a startling new view of the prophet, a depiction that survives the conventional portrait of

consternation and objection. Both projects seem to work toward a reconciliation of opposing points of view, of antagonistic convictions held by ancient and bitter adversaries. Joshua strikes a blow for a disturbingly ecumenical openness, which is extravagant enough to trouble a reader reasonably concerned with the essential unity of truth.

"Joshua" stretches to the maximum the elemental conviction that only the unity of faith in a gentle and all-patient God is vital; that all the rest is unimportant if the people of God are to be united in mutual, indiscriminating love. The skeptic, at least momentarily, finds himself asking the question raised long ago and, indeed, perennially: "Can we sacrifice the sacred essentials to the pious peripherals just because theologians argue, anger, and even defect from orthodox denominations over the questions of which is which?"

Father Girzone's Christ/Joshua, if he would not totally obliterate the fine distinctions in creed as irrelevant and too divisive to tolerate, would certainly underplay them. To Joshua, whether one believes that the redeeming Messiah has come or continues to wait for Him is less important than the need for all to worship together. Thus, Methodist, Episcopalian, Pentecostal and Catholic clergymen are shown to share a humanly faulted but central

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Focus, Joshua

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