

'Gospel Thrillers'*

Andrew S. Jacobs

Abstract

Decades before the publishing phenomenon *The Da Vinci Code* turned millions of readers on to the excitement and glamour of early Christian history and biblical studies, a steady stream of novels—some obscure, some bestsellers—were teaching the popular reading public about the thrills and chills of the academic study of Scriptures. These 'gospel thrillers' share a common plot: a recently discovered gospel (often a first-person account of Jesus' ministry by one of his disciples) threatens to turn our understanding of Christianity on its head. In a race against time (and the occasional Vatican assassin) the hero must find out if the new, shocking gospel is real. Of particular interest for the post-*Da Vinci Code* scholar is the portrayal of academics and academic work in these early 'gospel thrillers': from bronzed heroes to bumbling misanthropes to sinister tools of global conspiracies, the scholars of the 'gospel thrillers' instructed readers on what to love, and what to mistrust, about the academic project of biblical studies.

Scholars of early Christianity are relatively unaccustomed to finding themselves the object of popular culture scrutiny. We toil away with quiet dignity, content to let other academics—like swashbuckling Indiana Jones or schizophrenic genius John Nash—hog the glory.¹ All this changed with the

* This article first appeared as an address delivered after dinner to the North American Patristics Society, 3 June 2005. I would like to thank my research assistant, Mehul Parekh for hunting down various decades-old book reviews; Laura Nasrallah for her long-distance comments on an earlier draft of this study; and Maureen Tilley for inviting me to deliver the address that spawned this published version.

1. It is noteworthy that the same screenwriter who adapted Sylvia Masar's book about John Nash into the screenplay for *A Beautiful Mind*, Akiva Goldsman, has also been tapped to pen the screenplay for *The Da Vinci Code*, according to the Internet Movie Database (<<http://imdb.com/title/tt0382625/>>, accessed 6 May 2005); and, of course, Ron Howard is the director for both films, as well.

2003 publication of a bestselling novel by a previously little-known techno-thriller scribe named Dan Brown. *The Da Vinci Code* has hurtled us precipitously into the limelight. I'm sure many of you, like me, have fielded questions from students, colleagues, and family members; perhaps, like me, even been pressed into giving talks to local civic groups or submitted yourselves to radio or television interviews. Some more illustrious members of our scholarly society can even be seen on network and cable news magazines, chatting amiably with NBC's Stone Phillips or CNN's Aaron Brown.² Suddenly our quiet and dignified little *métier* has water-cooler *chic*. I sometimes imagine this is what paleontologists and geneticists must have experienced when *Jurassic Park* was released, fielding well-intentioned but groaning queries on raptors and 'T. Rex'.³

Yet this most recent wave of 'early Christian studies fever' touched off by Dan Brown is neither particularly new, nor original. I'm not just talking about Brown's reliance on 'non-fiction' Euro-conspiracy thrillers like *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. Rather, I refer to a slew of paperback novels that began appearing in the 1960s, which I call 'Gospel Thrillers'. These thrillers share a common plotline: a new gospel has been discovered (usually a first-century, first-person autograph) which, if authenticated, could change everything we think we know about Jesus, about Christianity, and about the history of 'the Church'. There is usually a 'race against time' for the hero to authenticate, or debunk, the newly discovered gospel, along with his smart and beautiful, and younger, female sidekick. Various forces are arrayed against our hero, usually allied in some mysterious way with the interests of 'organized religion'.

These 'gospel thrillers' emerged out of a convergence of scholarly discoveries and popular trends in religion. The finds at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and Khirbet Qumran in 1947 ignited an all-too-brief excitement, the possibility of new, transformative revelations about earliest Christianity. In 1954, the *Los Angeles Times* religion editor reported on the fervor of one southern California amateur lecturer. Miss Leota M. Mulkins reportedly proclaimed, 'For more than 15 years I've been convinced that first-century gospels would one day be discovered in the holy land... I even believe that

2. Members of the North American Patristics Society have appeared, to date, with Stone Phillips on the NBC special 'The Secrets of the Code' (13 April 2005) and with Aaron Brown on CNN's *Da Vinci Code*-inspired special 'The Two Marys' (12 December 2004).

3. The 'Trivia' section of *Jurassic Park's* entry in the Internet Movie Database notes: 'Both the film and the book generated so much interest in dinosaurs that the study of paleontology has had a record increase in students, and interest in general has skyrocketed, and has been at an all-time high ever since' (<<http://imdb.com/title/tt0107290/trivia>>, accessed 6 May 2005). For various paleontological and genetic missteps or mistakes in *Jurassic Park*, see the section on 'Biological Issues' in the entry for 'Jurassic Park', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jurassic_Park>, accessed 6 May 2006).

one day the Ark of the Covenant will be uncovered somewhere there.⁴ Even as such spectacular finds failed to materialize, the public held out hope: the same article reports that 'One Fundamentalist sect decided that carbon dating proved the linen wrapped around a scroll of Isaiah [from Qumran] was used "the very year of the crucifixion of Christ", failing to consider that no one knows the exact year of the crucifixion and the carbon dating method gives an approximation, not a precise year of age'.⁵ Eventually, the excitement abated: by 1964 a book reviewer could state with marked uninterest, 'When the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls became known a few years ago many people were vaguely disappointed. All right, they thought, so it's a contribution to scholarship'.⁶

But even as these ancient texts began to lose their revelatory appeal, the popular reimagination of Jesus and early Christianity remained enthusiastic. Hugh Schonfield's 1965 bestseller *The Passover Plot* posited that the Jesus we thought we knew—and the religion we thought was founded in his name—were very different from what Jesus himself intended. From the bell-bottomed, long-haired depths of 1970s California emerged the 'Jesus People', also known as 'Jesus Freaks', venerating Jesus as a hippie hero and proclaiming, in the words of one of its prominent ministers, 'Let everyone be a weirdo for Jesus!'⁷ *Jesus Christ, Superstar!* opened to condemnation and adulation on Broadway in the fall of 1971, presenting its audiences with a sympathetic, African-American Judas, a drag-queen Herod Antipas, and a gentle, besandaled Jesus singing about love, peace, and understanding. As a *Time* magazine cover story noted, often groups from the same religious denominations picketing outside the Mark Hellinger Theater could be found enthralled and enraptured inside the performance.⁸

While perhaps not as flamboyant as a bewigged Herod in platform shoes, the 'gospel thrillers' of the 1960s and 1970s provided another popular venue for reimagining earliest Christianity, and the possibilities of a religious road not taken. As works of fiction, these novels did not have to rely on creative 'rereading' of existing ancient sources, like *The Passover Plot*. A review of the earliest of these novels, 1964's *The Q Document*, puts

4. Dan L. Thrapp, 'New Scrolls Aid Testament Study: Southland Woman Predicts Finds Will Shed Light on Christian Era', *Los Angeles Times* (2 May 1954), A13.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Orville Prescott, 'Ingenious Plot Makes Implausible Tale (Review of *The Q Document* by James Hall Roberts)', *New York Times* (5 June 1964), 29.

7. Earl C. Gottschalk, Jr, 'Hip Cultures Discovers a New Trip: Fervent, Foot-Stompin' Religion; "Jesus Freaks" Quit Revolution, Drugs for Fundamentalism; They Offend & Anger Some', *Wall Street Journal* (2 March 1971), 1 and 14. The call to be a 'weirdo for Jesus' comes from 'The Rev. Arthur Blessitt, who runs a gospel nightclub in the Sunset Strip called His Place' (p. 14). See also the sympathetic Michael McFadden, *The Jesus Revolution* (New York: Harrow Books, 1972).

8. Bill Bender and Timothy Foote, 'The Gold Rush to Golgotha', *Time* (25 October 1971), 64-71.

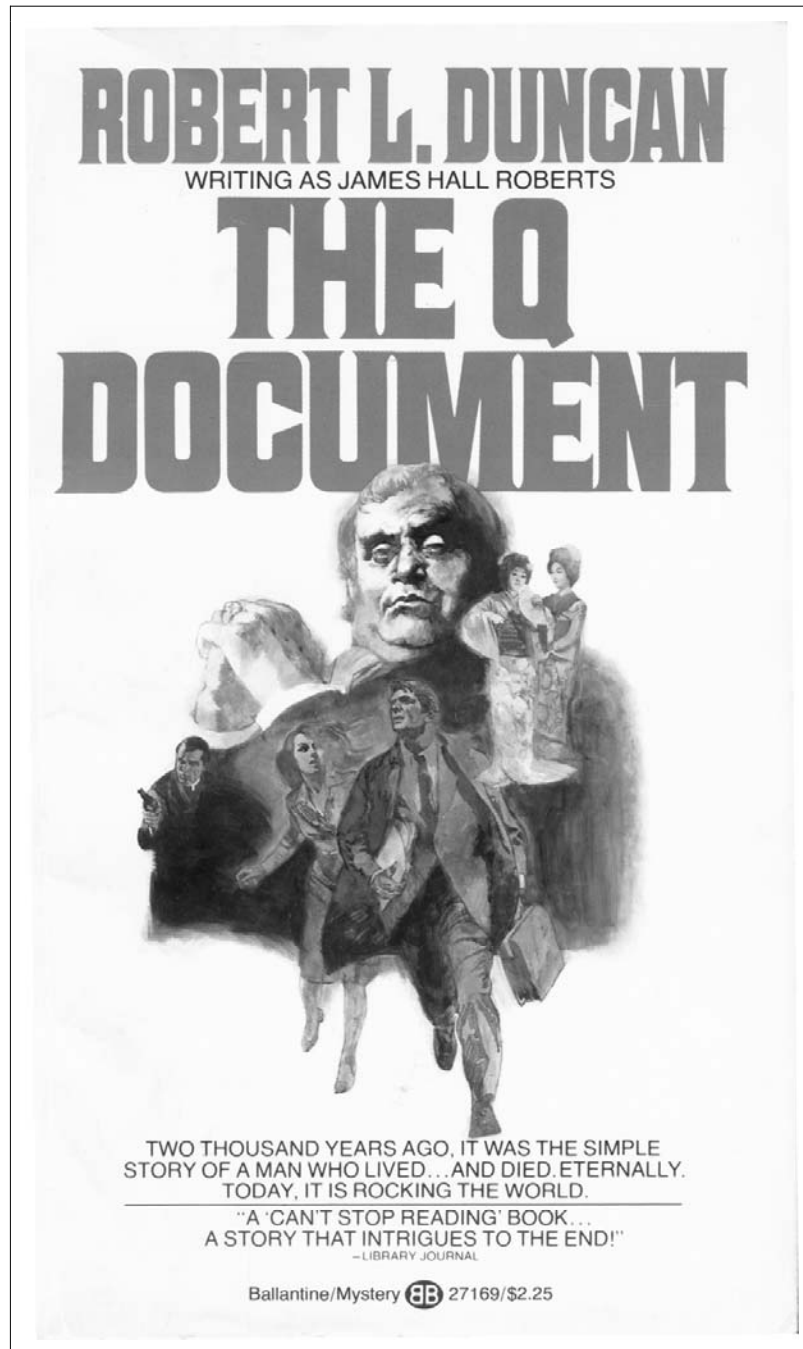


Figure 1. Jacket cover from *The Q Document* by Robert L. Duncan, copyright. Used by permission of Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

The overlay of images—gun-wielding priest, overblown and corpulent villain, geishas, briefcase-toting academic, and woman friend running in high heels—draw on the familiar register of 'spy novel' idioms.

it succinctly: 'If the Dead Sea Scrolls were insufficiently exciting, Mr Roberts could imagine documents that would be'.⁹ 'Roberts' is James Hall Roberts, whose novel *The Q Document* set the pattern for the next four decades of gospel thrillers.¹⁰ From the spy-novel-esque cover art of the paperback edition: overlapping chromatic images of a man and woman running with a briefcase, a Roman Catholic priest brandishing a pistol, two kimonoed geishas, and the corpulent figure of a sinister-looking white-haired man (see Figure 1). To the back-cover copy: 'The Nazis wanted it. The Red Chinese wanted it. The Vatican wanted it. And a ruthless Englishman who traded in stolen goods—and human lives—wanted it: The Q Document.' Cover art and copy reveal many of the threads that will weave through most of these gospel thrillers: international intrigue, as characters travel from Italy to Paris to the Dead Sea to Mount Athos, mingling with ease and a little distaste with a variety of locals; an understated yet insidious xenophobia, particularly with respect to that archenemy of the American *imaginaire*, the feminized, colonizing Englishman; an equally irritating and pervasive misogyny, as even the most qualified and intelligent women (always referred to by their first names) remain two admiring steps behind the male heroes (always referred to by their last names); and a growing mistrust of institutional Christianity, usually embodied in the shadowy *über*-Church, Roman Catholicism.

In the case of Roberts' *The Q Document*, the novel itself isn't quite as appalling in these respects as the front and back covers would have us think: the sinister 'Englishman who trades in human lives' is, in fact, an American ex-patriate. The priest in the novel never actually draws the pistol out of his pocket, only briefly succumbing to the temptation to use violence before becoming, as he is throughout the novel, the upright and basically meek teacher and adviser. As for the geishas—well, I don't want to ruin the entire plot for you; suffice to say, most of the geisha-oriented action takes place, if at all, well 'off-stage' of the main plot.

As the earliest of the gospel thrillers, it is notable that *The Q Document* is also the most sympathetic to us, the scholars of early Christianity. The hero, George Cooper, is a disaffected expert on 'the tangential effects of Christianity, the Gnostics, the Apologists, the Copts, that sort of thing' (p. 55), who, in his late thirties, following a domestic tragedy, has fled his tenured position at Cumberland College, a fictional school on the east coast.¹¹ Now living in Tokyo, doing translation work for an antiques dealer

9. Prescott, 'Ingenious Plot'.

10. 'James Hall Roberts' was revealed soon after to be a pseudonym for moderately successful television writer Robert Duncan: William R. Melton, Jr, 'Duncan's Pen Mightier than His TV Typewriter', *Los Angeles Times* (19 June 1966), B18, 28.

11. Clearly meant to be a small, prestigious school, 'Cumberland' is close enough to Yale for Cooper to take an afternoon train and be home by that evening (p. 127).

with a side business in prostitution,¹² Cooper is still presented as a model historian: 'He was a tall, spare man, too pale perhaps from lack of sunshine, but his pallor was a mark of his occupation' (p. 15). Cooper takes pride in the fact that, in his previous work, he had never allowed himself to 'sentimentalize the documents he worked with... He would leave such speculative indulgences to the creative historians who took the raw material he provided and wove it into the colorful fabric of social history' (p. 39). His faithful friend, the normally mild-mannered Father O'Connor, describes him admiringly as 'a historian's historian' (p. 56).

With such a serious academic hero, it is not surprising that *The Q Document* so effortlessly conveys the inner workings of academia. Within the first ten pages we have Cooper discussing some of the manuscripts he has translated, including a nineteenth-century forgery of 'an open letter from Marcion denouncing his heresies', a tenth-century copy of 'Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*', and a 'corrected section of the *Diatessaron*' which, he allows, may have been penned by Tatian himself (pp. 7-8). If this burst of erudition were not enough, we also gain insight into academic life, as Cooper reads a plaintive missive from his department chair back home: 'There was a good bit of scholarly gossip—Jergens had finally found a publisher for his monograph on Charlemagne; old Steady was drinking again' (p. 2). Roberts' sense of his protagonist's scholarly milieu is, from the outset, uncanny.

Yet this early gospel thriller also reveals some of the difficulties of making a 'historian's historian' your protagonist. After translating a series of documents (in Latin, Greek, Aramaic, and 'Neo-Hebrew') that portray Jesus as a messianic madman and Paul as a zealous missionary condemned by Roman authorities for murdering a rival Jewish revolutionary, Cooper becomes slowly cognizant of the conflicts between detached scholarship and 'doing the right thing'. Eventually, he undergoes a sentimentalizing breakthrough: 'I've always prided myself on being a cold, objective, impersonal man when it comes to my work. When I've published anything, it's represented a conservative point of view, all very defensible...but there's such a thing as being too rational, too impressed with the demonstrable things of the world' (p. 196). In the end, during the novel's climactic showdown—a private auction conducted between a Marxist historian from 'Red China' and a skeptical but uneasy representative from the Vatican—Cooper's nascent compassion and scholarly acumen combine to save the day: Jesus is redeemed from megalomania, Paul is acquitted of murder, the 'Q Document' returned to the realm of hypothesis, and the academic hero rides off into the sunset, happily returning to teach at Cumberland College.

12. On the Japanese setting for the novel, a reviewer speculated (when the true identity of the author was still unknown), 'It is laid in Japan, perhaps because Mr Roberts thought his villain would be able to carry on his nefarious activities there more comfortably than elsewhere' (Prescott, 'Ingenious Plot'). The author, Robert Duncan, had apparently also enjoyed a 'stint in the army of occupation in Japan' (Melton, 'Duncan's Pen').

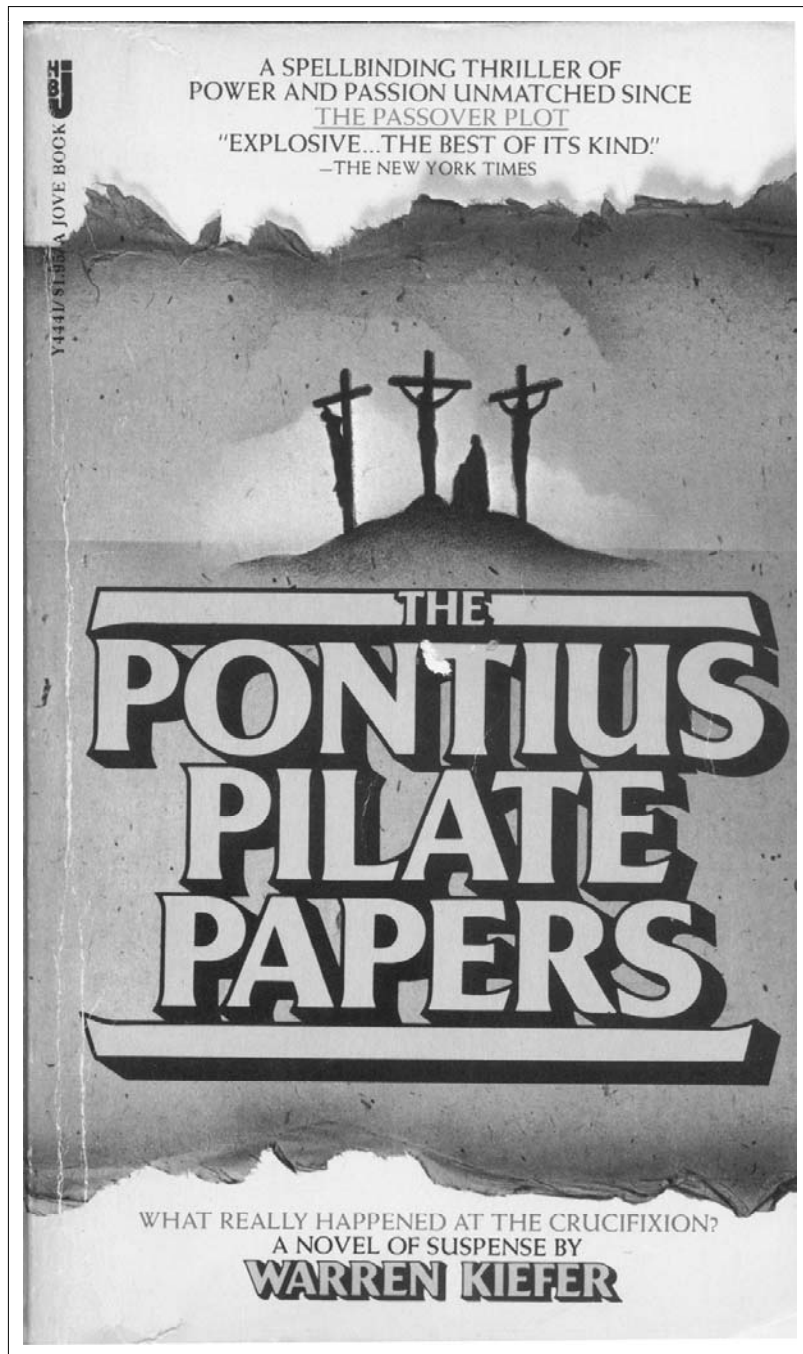


Figure 2. Cover art from *The Pontius Pilate Papers*.

As befitting a more archaeologically driven gospel thriller, the cover art superimposes a silhouette of the crucifixion featuring a shadowy figure—Pilate? Longinus?—over a torn piece of (blank) parchment.

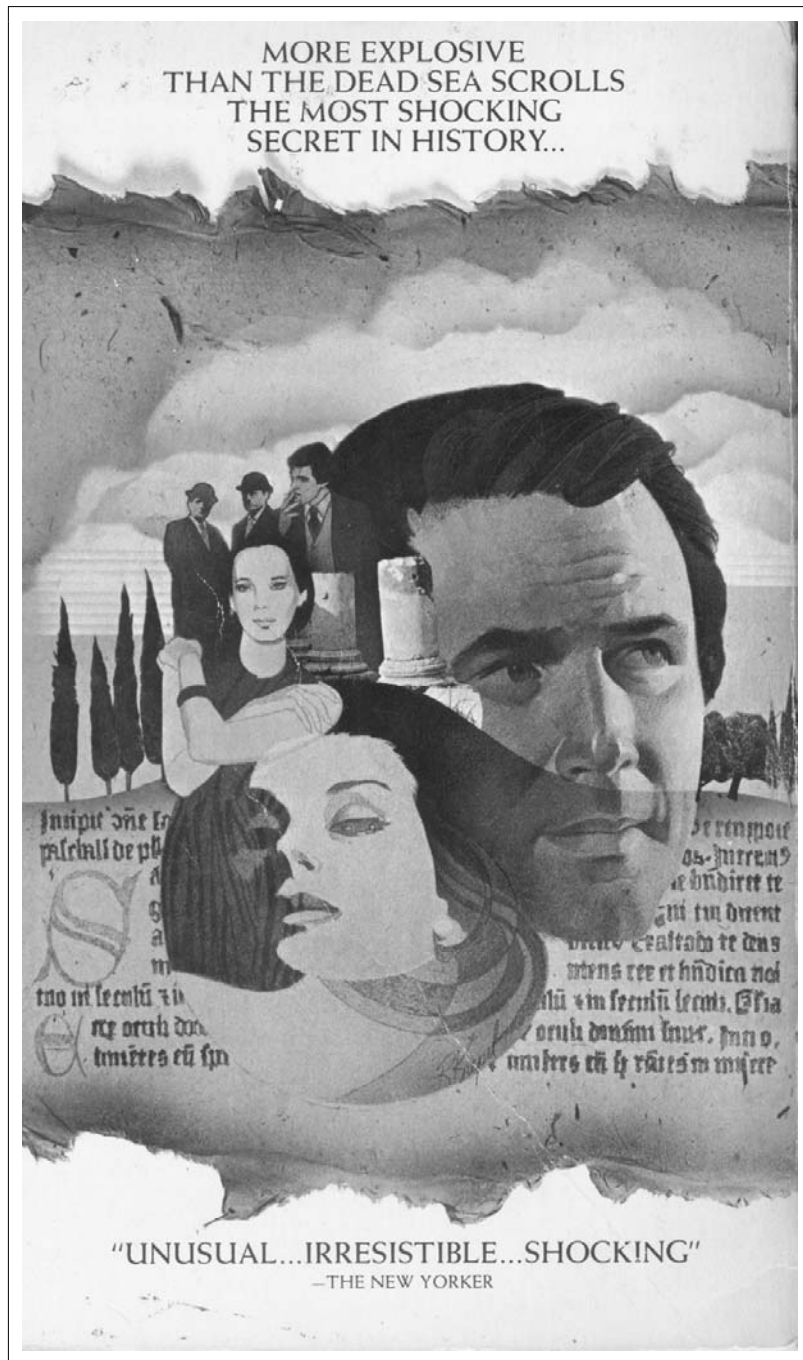


Figure 3. Back cover art from *The Pontius Pilate Papers*.

The torn parchment continues onto the back cover, where we find minuscule Latin script covered with landscape, ruins, and figural images that also play with the 'spy novel' imagistic idiom. Although difficult to see in black and white reproduction, the central figure, the hero Jay Marcus, has one brown eye and one blue one. While this physical detail appears nowhere in the novel, it is likely an attempt to render in striking fashion his self-description as half-Irish, half-Jewish.

This first gospel thriller introduced to readers the typical scholar of early Christianity: multilingual, hard-working, pale, and unremarkable but attractive enough and surprisingly resourceful in a crisis. Roberts portrays us with sympathy, a bit of wonder, and a great deal of heart. But spinning a golden hero out of our academic straw proved more challenging for later writers of gospel thrillers. For instance, Warren Kiefer's 1976 *The Pontius Pilate Papers* demonstrates that, on our own, we may not be *quite* enough to sustain the admiration of a reading public (see Figures 2 and 3).

The Pontius Pilate Papers does, at points, present an 'inside' view of the world of academia, but it is far from flattering. In one scene, the narrator and a French paleographer are discussing the Israeli archaeologist Victor Lanholtz, whose controversial discovery of the so-called 'papers' and subsequent murder have set off the novel's action:

'He had enemies'. Merle tilted back in his chair and folded his hands to stop the tremor.

'Because of his brilliance?'

'Because of his arrogance. His behavior sometimes verged on the unethical'.

'In what way?'

'The usual. Stealing the work of his talented graduate students'. (p. 134)

Clearly, a certain cynicism about our noble calling has found its way into the gospel thriller genre by this point. What's more, despite the fact that the setting of the novel is 'biblical archaeology', from excavation to laboratory to museum, Kiefer does not integrate the 'nitty-gritty' of archaeological science or ancient history as seamlessly into his text as other gospel thrillers do. Alone among the novels I've looked at, *The Pontius Pilate Papers* resorts to asterisked footnotes (instead of contextual exposition) to explain such arcana as Flavius Josephus and thermoluminescence (pp. 20, 70).

Yet further distance is placed between the reader and that academic world by the identity of the narrator: 40-year-old Jay Brian Marcus is a medical doctor who gave up his scalpel after inheriting a vast fortune. He spends half his time in his Paris flat, on the 'second floor of a seventeenth-century building overlooking its own private courtyard' (p. 120), lecturing occasionally at the Sorbonne on ancient medicine; and the rest of his time on his yacht 'the *Kalina*, a beamy, comfortable ketch of eighty feet, equipped as an archaeological diving platform, laboratory and floating home for me and the friends who join me on summer excavations, mostly around Greece' (p. 8). Having given up the practice of medicine he has become an 'archaeological bum' and an 'off-beat specialist of sorts', writing books with titles like *Surgical Practices in the Augustan Age*, *Epidemiological Aspects of Rome's Decline*, and a 'two-volume history of Alexandrian medicine' (pp. 7-8). In the midst of the very public hunt for the stolen 'Pontius Pilate Papers', a British newspaper describes him as 'millionaire American playboy Jay Marcus', while early on Marcus characterizes himself

as follows: 'That me—Jay Brian Marcus, surgeon *manqué*, dilettante digger, wandering Irish-American Jew' (p. 8).

Marcus is a flashier version of *The Q Document's* pale but steadfast hero, Cooper. When Marcus's overly assiduous Spanish housekeeper, Nelida, disapprovingly remarks that he's not eating enough, Marcus tells us with some amusement: 'Her sense of proportion in these matters had always been at odds with my own. To be lean and bronzed like a fisherman is, in her view, an unfortunate physical handicap for a serious scholar' (p. 100). Bronze and charming—women *literally* fall into his bed in the course of the novel—Marcus is also casually erudite, reading Latin manuscripts with facility, and dropping untold amounts of money at auctions for rare ancient and medieval manuscripts. He is, perhaps, the fantasy version of ourselves, through whose adventures our own daily grind becomes more exciting.

Likewise, the 'Pontius Pilate Papers' around which the thriller revolves—a series of Latin letters purportedly written by Pilate's brother-in-law, Longinus, and discovered in a villa north of Caesarea—magnify the 'insufficiently exciting' real papyri discovered in the twentieth century. The climax of the novel—where all is revealed—takes place during the unexpectedly lively Fourteenth International Conference on Middle Eastern Archaeology at the University of Oxford, where, at the opening reception in Christ Church college, our narrator learns that 'Word of the Pontius Pilate Papers had by now been in the press for days, the first big popular story on archaeology since the Dead Sea Scrolls' (p. 275). Of course, the 'excitement' of the new discovery, like the 'bronzed body' and limitless bank account of its heroic investigator, suggest by contrast (and, of course, inaccurately) the dull reality of both papyrus and papyrologist outside the exhilarating world of gospel thrillers.

Even so, at least the fictional Jay Marcus, MD, is attracted to the excitement of antiquity, suggesting—if only for a moment—that any well-educated multimillionaire adventurers might, in the real world, also find our work fascinating enough to leave their professional lives behind and follow in our footsteps. Other gospel thrillers dismiss the academic-as-hero altogether. The British 1972 novel *The Judas Gospel*, by Peter van Greenaway, presents the academic as tragic bungler. The discoverer of the eponymous gospel that sets this thriller in motion is Geoffrey Mallory, a 42-year-old assistant lecturer in Semitic languages, who knew that he 'rated fairly low in the widening circle of lecturers in ancient languages', or, as he phrases it to his more swashbuckling archaeologist friend, Sir Max Lonsdale, 'Ancient Hebrew experts are ten a shekel' (pp. 9-10). Mallory himself disabuses us of the notion that he will rise to the occasion and find his heroic soul, like Cooper in *The Q Document*. As he ponders the Judean desert in which he somehow finds himself, a few miles from Qumran, he thinks: 'I consider myself to be past the age to be indulging in high adventure... I prefer my study—the lecture room—the theory against the practice. I am not a man of action.'

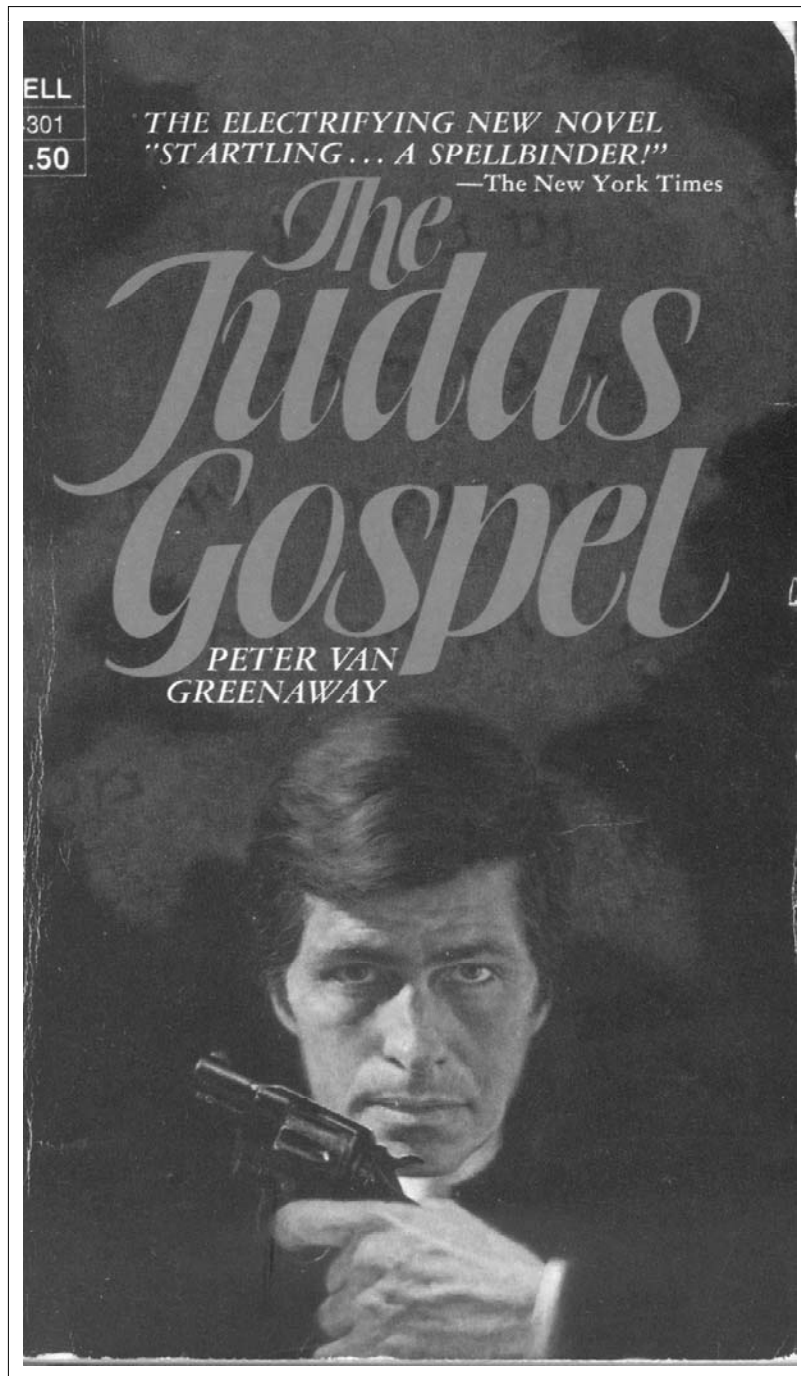


Figure 4. Jacket cover from *The Judas Gospel*, by Peter Van Greenaway. Used by permission of Dell Publishing, a division of Random House, Inc.

The most simplistic of the gospel thriller covers, subtle but nonetheless effective. On first glance, a casual bookstore browser might not notice that the single figure holding a gun is wearing the white collar and black cassock of a Dominican monk. More difficult to see, even in the original color, is the fragment of papyrus behind the main title with surprisingly realistic Aramaic script peeking through.

The thought of gunfire, locusts, scorpions, air insurance, and sleeping in a tent terrifies me. I can still feel the ghastly needle prick of the typhoid inoculation' (p. 9). Mallory puts it bluntly to Sir Max, 'I'm a scholar, not a hero. If I'd wanted to go looking for danger I'd have joined the army' (p. 10).

Danger nonetheless finds Mallory. As he's relieving himself ignominiously near an open cave by the Dead Sea, the rest of his archaeological party—including the swashbuckling Sir Max—are killed by a guerilla attack. When Mallory scrambles up a rock face to hide from the assault, he stumbles upon a 2000-year-old scroll. Even at this point, his inner monologue reminds us that, in his own words, he's a 'scholar, not a hero': 'Not excited so much as puzzled, he saw that he was holding what appeared to be a scroll... Ancient Hebrew, unquestionably; very probably first century A.D., though of course there could be some doubt if one took the Uzziah inscription as...as...his thoughts faltered...' (p. 56). Soon after being rescued by the Israeli army, Mallory reveals that the scholar is not only boring, but greedy: he smuggles the scroll out of Israel and sets out to sell it for ten million pounds to the Vatican.

At this point the true hero—or, rather, anti-hero—of the novel appears: a dashing, brilliant, and amoral Italian monk named Giovanni della Paresi (see Figure 4): 'Master of the Sacred palace, the Pope's personal theologian' known around the halls of Vatican City simply as 'the Dominican' (p. 146). Young and handsome (as the author puts it, 'the irony of good looks shackled to celibacy'), the Dominican is assigned by the Pope to go and 'negotiate' with Mallory for the Judas gospel. His tactics prove rather more sinister: masked by a series of disguises (August Hartz, Austrian businessman; Mr Simpkins, British milquetoast in the big city; Richard Baines, smarmy lecturer in Ancient Languages at Bangor), the Dominican ruthlessly and meticulously plots to purloin the Judas gospel and eliminate anyone with knowledge of the dangerous discovery. Leaving a trail of corpses behind him, the Dominican goes slowly insane—both from the weight of his actions and the contents of the gospel which make Judas a hero, and Peter a villain.

Instead of giving us academic intrigue, van Greenaway uses the gospel thriller to critique the madness of religion itself, against which scholarly inquiry is merely an ineffective irritant. Indeed, the mealy semiticist Mallory is driven as much by irrational anti-religious sentiment as the Dominican is by fanatical loyalty to Rome. Mallory's wife, Bernadette, is on the verge of leaving him in order to convert to Catholicism, and Mallory himself is still haunted by the memory of 'Low Church parents, crazed by religion, regulating his life by their crimping interpretations of the Old Testament' (p. 133). The critique of 'organized religion'—located by typically sloppy synecdoche on the shoulders of the Roman Catholic Church—is a central motif in many of these gospel thrillers, magnified to almost comical proportions by van Greenaway and *The Judas Gospel*.

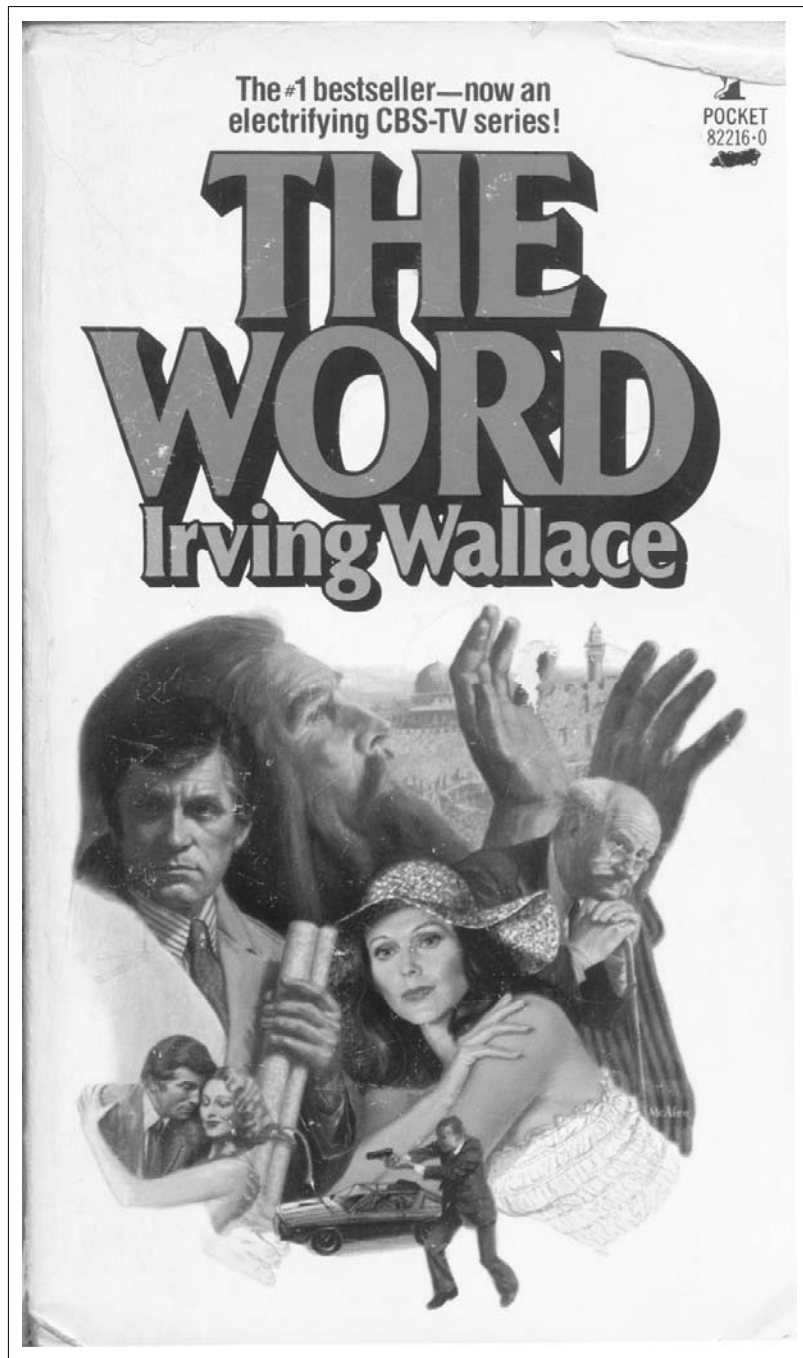


Figure 5. Cover art of the Pocket Book edition of *The Word* by Irving Wallace (New York: Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 1973). Used with permission.

Again the roundel of images features the hero (twice) as well as his two love interests; a car (denoting, no doubt, 'chase scenes'); an unidentified man (not the hero) wielding a gun; a deceptively harmless looking older man with a cane, probably meant to represent the American publisher; and an ecstatic figure overlooking a background of (modern) Jerusalem. Despite the anachronistic backdrop, this figure may represent James, the brother of Jesus, the author of the gospel at the center of *The Word*.

The surprisingly patient reviewer of the novel in the Catholic magazine *Commonweal* describes it as 'a rather tedious polemic against religion and Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular'.¹³ The review in *Time* magazine, on the other hand, perhaps captures a particular anti-scholarly and anti-religious 1970s *Zeitgeist* more broadly, admitting 'many Christians' will find the novel 'not only...bizarre but blasphemous', while noting with approval that 'van Greenaway's anticlericalism is usually witty, and only occasionally foolish'.¹⁴

The last gospel thriller I present to you is surely the crown jewel of the pre-*Da Vinci Code* genre: Irving Wallace's *The Word* (see Figure 5). The number five bestselling novel of 1973,¹⁵ adapted as a six-hour CBS miniseries in 1978, *The Word* tells its story through the eyes of oversexed, overly cynical public relations dynamo Steve Randall. The novel was so popular—and so open to good-natured ribbing—that the *New York Times* ran two reviews: the first, a midweek review, inaugurated 'Kick Irving Wallace Day': 'a day set aside by Eastern Establishment critics for high-jinks and revelry—a sort of literary *faschung*, a rag day when the critical fraternity subjects poor Mr Wallace to hazing with verbal paddles'.¹⁶ The second review, appearing a few days later in the Sunday Book Review, is set as a bedtime dialogue between the reviewer and his wife, and begins, 'It had been a terrible dream. I woke up screaming. I fell out of bed', a lede designed to convey both the reviewer's displeasure with the novel and to mimic Wallace's own famously stilted prose style.¹⁷ As much as book reviewers groaned, they universally agreed that Wallace's gospel thriller was both timely and destined to be an enormous success with the American readership.¹⁸

In the novel, PR-whiz Randall, buffeted by domestic tragedies, business *ennui*, and a recurring sexual dyspepsia, is hired by a conglomerate of American and European Bible publishers and their theological advisers to promote a project code-named 'Resurrection Two'—the publication of a

13. John J. Navonne, 'The Monk as Criminal (Review of Peter van Greenaway, *The Judas Gospel*)', *Commonweal* (27 July 1973), 407.

14. Mayo Mohs, 'Ecce Homo (Review of Peter van Greenaway, *The Judas Gospel*)', *Time* (9 October 1972), 87.

15. According to Publishers Weekly, whose annual bestsellers lists for the entire twentieth century are available from Cader Books at <<http://www.caderbooks.com/bestintro.html>>, accessed 10 May 2005).

16. Richard B. Lingeman, 'Happy Irving Wallace Day! (Review of Irving Wallace, *The Word*)', *New York Times* (15 March 1972), 45.

17. Steven Kroll, 'The Gospel according to Wallace (Review of Irving Wallace, *The Word*)', *New York Times* (19 March 1972), BR39. Lest we feel sorry for Wallace, hammered by the 'paper of record' twice in one week, we should also note that the same edition of the Sunday Book Review also ran a full page ad for *The Word* on p. BR13.

18. Carolyn Riley, 'Review of Irving Wallace, *The Word*', *Best Sellers* (15 April 1972), 43-44.

revised 'International New Testament'. The New New Testament has not only been completely retranslated, but now includes a 'fifth gospel', discovered in a sealed brick in Ostia by a maverick Italian archaeologist. This new Gospel according to James tells the *true* story of Jesus, who (apparently) survived the crucifixion in Jerusalem and went on to preach peace and love and brotherhood all the way to Rome, dying and resurrected there in his 50s. Everyone who reads the new gospel is miraculously touched: their psychic wounds are healed and, in at least one case, physical infirmities are cured, as well. Pitted against Resurrection Two is sinister Dutch Reformed minister Maertin de Vroome, described by the American publisher as one of 'those young Turks in the clergy who want to overthrow the orthodox church, convert it into a commune for social work and to the devil with faith and with Christ... [De] Vroome is a heretic, a student of form criticism, influenced by that other heretic, Rudolf Bultmann, the German theologian' (pp. 110-11). Eventually, the claims of the new gospel begin to unravel and Randall jets around Europe trying to find the truth. I quote here from the back cover copy of the paperback edition:

From New York and London to Amsterdam, Paris, Frankfurt, Rome—from the British Museum to a French radiocarbon laboratory, from the Dutch Westkerk to a monastery on a Grecian peninsula—young, cynical public relations man Steven Randall pursues a shadowy, mysterious figure. He pursues a convict, a madman, and the genius who alone knows the truth about THE WORD.

Wallace was, as several reviewers note, an almost obsessive researcher, giving his readers excruciating and needless detail. Having an 'outsider' as the protagonist gives Wallace the opportunity to show off the fruits of his academic dabbling, as the protagonist PR-flak does 'research' in order to promote the new Bible. One reviewer complained, 'Most of the novel, insofar as it concerns Biblical history and scholarship, reads with all the smoothness and spontaneity of a box of research notes on 3 × 5 cards'.¹⁹ The inaugurator of 'Kick Irving Wallace Day' likewise noted with some amusement, 'Mr Wallace is a serious man who swots up on his subjects. He throws in large, partially digested chunks of his research—what a codex is, the complexities of Aramaic, little-known theories about the historical Jesus. He is up on the religious issues of the day, and the names of such theologians as Renan, Tillich, and Bonhoeffer drop with scarcely audible clunks.'²⁰ I would add to this list the three pages on the downfall of Aelius Sejanus (pp. 104-106), four pages where Randall learns about 'the most valuable biblical discoveries made in the last nineteen hundred years' (pp. 130-33),²¹ and five pages on 'the carbon-14 dating process' (pp. 268-72),

19. Riley, 'Review of *The Word*'.

20. Lingeman, 'Happy Irving Wallace Day!'

21. These include: the Dead Sea Scrolls, Codex Sinaiticus, the Nag Hammadi codices, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Alexandrinus (at which point Randall asks his inter-

and so many more in the course of nearly 700 paperback pages. Yet Wallace is at pains to communicate to the reader how *exciting* all of this scholarly information can be. At one point, when Randall is taken to see the Codex Sinaiticus in the British Museum, his tour guide, senior British scholar Dr Jeffries, tells him: 'That this much of the Codex Sinaiticus was salvaged makes quite a thriller of a story. Have you ever heard the name Constantine Tischendorf?' Unsurprisingly, Randall has not: 'Randall shook his head. He had never heard the odd name before, but it intrigued him. "Briefly, here is our thriller", said Dr Jeffries with evident relish' (p. 134). Three pages later, when Dr Jeffries has finished his tale of Tischendorf, Sinai, and the Russian czar, he concludes: "'Quite a story, what?" "Quite a story", Randall agreed' (p. 136). Electricity crackles with every morsel of academic jargon and recondite name dropped.

Apart from Randall and his predictably smitten Italian love interest, few of the characters in *The Word* come off well. Academics are uniformly unattractive, to the point of caricature. Dr Jeffries, the master storyteller, is 'under six feet [which, in Wallace's world, means "short"], barrel-chested, with shaggy white hair, a small head with rheumy eyes, pinkish nose with large pores, an untidy moustache, wrinkled face, striped bow tie, dangling pincenez, and a blue suit in need of a pressing' (p. 130). If the studiously unkempt Jeffries were not sufficient, his assistant, the improbably named Dr Florian Knight, is straight out of a Victorian novel. He is described to Randall as looking 'rather like Aubrey Beardsley... Kind of Buster Brown haircut, deep-set eyes, nose like the beak of an eagle, pushed-out lower lip, long, thin hands... High-pitched voice, high-strung manner, but absolutely a marvel on New Testament languages and scholarship' (p. 116). When Randall meets Florian Knight, he finds that he does indeed 'resemble Aubrey Beardsley... Only he looked more so, more the esthete, more the eccentric. He was sipping what Randall supposed was sherry from a wineglass' (p. 147).

When Randall first sees de Vroome, the revolutionary minister who dabbles in the diabolical form criticism, the cleric conveys an image of the dedicated religious as a creepy Bond villain: 'Dominee Maertin de Vroome stood inside the door fondling two brown-marked Siamese kittens... He was draped in a long-straight-cut black talar or cassock... The facial features were ascetic and cadaverous, a high, lined brow, hooded eyes that were disarmingly powder-blue, sunken cheeks, a nearly lipless mouth, a lantern jaw' (pp. 347-48). The menacing strong-arm of institutional religion and the decadent eccentricity of scholarly inquiry eventually band together against truth-seeking, tough-as-nails Randall. While the depth of their

locutor to explain what a 'codex' is), Adolf Deismann's work on *koinē* Greek, Saint Peter's tomb, the limestone 'Pilate inscription', and the ossuary containing the only physical remains of a crucified body.

misdeeds remains shadowy, their motives are crystal clear: to appoint the next 'general secretary' of the World Council of Churches, and 'through him to restructure the World Council into a protestant Vatican, with Geneva as its headquarters' (p. 355). For Wallace, when scholarship and ecumenism band together, the result is even more baleful institutionalization of the spirit—or, as Randall sarcastically calls it when he finds he has been outmaneuvered at the end, 'the Galilee Mafia' (p. 639).

In the end, the Galilee Mafia wins, and 'the Word' is released. Its effects are, to say the least, astounding. By the time Randall goes home to the midwestern town of his youth for Christmas nearly six months after his adventures with carbon-dating and Tischendorf, the world has been transformed by the Word:

If you went shopping, visited a bar, dined in a restaurant, attended a party, you heard it discussed.

The drums beat, and the charismatic new Christ was gathering souls again, souls without number. The decrease in violence was being attributed by some to the return to Christ. The improvement in the economy was being credited by others to Christ. The drop in drug usage was owing to Christ. The end of this war, the beginning of that peace talk, the general well-being and euphoria and brotherhood sweeping the earth were heralded by the recently awakened as the work of Christ. (p. 661)

Few of us can probably boast of a similar worldwide reaction to our own scholarly endeavors. Yet in all of these gospel thrillers, there is an absolute (and, it must be admitted, gratifying) certainty with respect to the life-shattering importance of what we do. Every single person who comes across the newly discovered gospels knows, deep down, that scholarly discovery can change the world—regardless of whether the discoveries themselves turn out to be authentic (and they rarely do). It is a heady portrayal of our diffident profession, as true 40 years ago as it has become again today: the leaden minutiae of radiocarbon-dating, Aramaic grammar, the 'spellbinding tale' of Constantine Tischendorf, all gripped the imagination of readers in the 1960s and 1970s in the same way *The Da Vinci Code* has re-energized interest in canon formation and the Council of Nicaea. As we continue in the coming year to be pressed with queries by the reading public—who are *dying* to know about Jesus' memoirs hidden in the Vatican secret archives—we should take a moment to reflect upon and appreciate this dazzling fictionalization of our work, patiently answer the questions that come, and ponder silently in our heads: 'Who would play me in the movie?'

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