Source:

M. Baigent, R. Leigh, + H. Lincoln, The messianic Legacy, NY: Dell, 1986

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Scholarship and Public Understanding

. . . This fell into my hands by chance a little while ago. Until then I'd never had any intimation of what was being done nowadays in the field of biblical research, or of the attacks being launched by competent historians. It was a shock to me—and a revelation! . . . I learnt all sorts of facts that were entirely new to me. That the Gospels, for example, were written between the years 65 and 100. That means the Church was founded, and was able to carry on, without them. Think of it! More than sixty years after Christ's birth! It's as if someone today wanted to write down Napoleon's words and deeds without being able to consult a single written document, only vague memories and anecdotes.'

Apart from the reference to Napoleon, the above quotation, to judge from the letters and verbal declarations we received, might have expressed, almost verbatim, the reaction of a contemporary reader to *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* when it was published in 1982. In fact, the words are from a novel, *Jean Barois* by Roger Martin du Gard, published in 1912, and in that novel they elicit the response:

. . . Before long all theologians of any intellectual standing will have reached these conclusions. In fact, they'll be amazed that nineteenth-century Catholics contrived to believe for so long in the literal truth of those poetic legends.'

Yet even before the time of this fictional dialogue, set in the 1870s, Jesus and the origins of Christianity had begun to emerge as a burgeoning industry for researchers, writers and publishers. In the early sixteenth century, Pope Leo X is on record as declaring: 'It has served us well, this myth of Christ.' As early as the 1740s, scholars had deployed what we would now recognise as a valid historical methodology for questioning the veracity of scriptural accounts. Thus, between 1744 and 1767, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, a professor at Hamburg, had argued that Jesus was nothing more than a failed Judaic revolutionary whose body was removed from its tomb by his disciples. By the mid-nineteenth century, German biblical scholarship had truly come of age, and a dating of the Gospels had been established which—in its approach and in most of its conclusions—is still deemed valid. Today, no reputable historian or biblical scholar would deny that the earliest of the Gospels was composed at least a generation after the events it describes. The thrust of German research was eventually to culminate in a position summarised by Rudolf Bultmann of the University of Marburg, one of the most important, most famous and most esteemed of twentieth-century biblical commentators:

> I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary.'

Yet Bultmann remained a devout Christian. He did so by insisting on a crucial distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. As long as this distinction was acknowledged, faith remained tenable. If the distinction were not acknowledged, faith would inevitably find itself eroded and embarrassed by the ineluctable facts of history.

This was the kind of conclusion to which nineteenth-century German biblical scholarship would eventually lead. At the same time, however, the bastion of traditional scriptural authority was also being challenged from other quarters. The controversial contentions of German research remained confined to a rarefied sphere of specialists: but in 1863 the French writer Ernest Renan caused a major international controversy with his celebrated best-seller *The Life of Jesus*. This work, which sought to strip Christianity of its supernatural trappings and present Jesus as 'an incomparable man', was perhaps the single most talked-about book of its age. Its impact on the public was enormous; and among the figures it most deeply influenced was Albert Schweitzer. Yet even Renan's treatment was to be regarded as saccharine and uncritically sentimental by the generation of Modernists who had begun to appear in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. And the majority of Modernists, it should be noted, were working within the framework of the church—until, that is, they were officially condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907 and an anti-Modernist oath was introduced in 1910.

By this time, the findings of both German biblical scholarship and of the Roman Catholic Modernists had begun to find their way into the arts. Thus, in 1916, the Anglo-Irish novelist George Moore published his own fictionalised account of Jesus in *The Brook Kerith*. Moore caused considerable scandal by depicting Jesus as surviving the Crucifixion, and being nursed back to health by Joseph of Arimathea. In the years since *The Brook Kerith* was published, there have been numerous other fictionalised accounts of the Gospel story. In 1946, Robert Graves published his ambitious fictional portrait, *King Jesus*, in which Jesus again survives the Cross. And in 1954, Nikos Kazantzakis, the Nobel Prize-winning Greek author, caused an international rumpus with *The Last Temptation*. In contrast to the Jesus figures in Moore and Graves, Kazantzakis's protagonist does die on the Cross. Before he does so, however, he has a vision of what his life should and would have been had he not voluntarily submitted

himself to his final sacrifice. In this vision—a kind of 'flash-forward' in fantasy—Jesus sees himself married to the Magdalene (for whom he has lusted all through the book) and fathering a family upon her.

These examples illustrate the extent to which biblical scholarship opened up new territory for the arts. Two hundred years ago, a novel dealing with scriptural material would have been unthinkable. Even poetry would not address such matters except in the more or less orthodox, more or less devotional form of *Paradise Lost*. By the twentieth century, however, Jesus and his world had become 'fair game', not for luridly sensational purposes, but as valid points of enquiry and exploration for serious, internationally acclaimed literary figures. Through their work, the fruits of biblical scholarship were disseminated to an ever-widening audience.

Biblical scholarship itself did not stand still. Jesus and the world of the New Testament continued to be addressed by professional historians and researchers who, with increasing rigour and fresh evidence at their disposal, sought to establish the facts surrounding that enigmatic individual of two thousand years ago. Many of these works were intended primarily for other experts in the field and attracted little popular attention. A few, however, were pitched to the general reading public and engendered considerable controversy. *The Passover Plot* (1963) by Dr Hugh Schonfield argued that Jesus staged his own mock crucifixion and did not die on the Cross; the book became an international best-seller, with more than three million copies now in print. More recently, controversy was provoked by *Jesus the Magician*, in which Dr Morton Smith depicts his protagonist as a typical wonder-worker of the age, a figure of a kind that thronged the Middle East at the beginning of the Christian era. The Jesus of Morton Smith is not significantly different from, say, Apollonius of Tyana, or the prototype (assuming one existed) of the legendary figure of Simon Magus.

In addition to material devoted specifically to Jesus, there have been innumerable works on the origins of Christianity, the formation of the early Church and its roots in Old Testament Judaism. Here, Dr Schonfield has again played a prominent role with a

series of works addressed to the background of the New Testament. And in 1979 Elaine Pagels attracted the world's attention, and an immense readership, with *The Gnostic Gospels*—a study of the Nag Hammadi Scrolls, discovered in Egypt in 1945, which offered a radical new interpretation of Christian teaching and tradition.

Biblical scholarship has made enormous advances during the last forty years, aided immensely by the discovery of new primary sources, material unavailable to researchers in the past. The most famous of these sources, of course, are the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947 in the ruins of the ascetic Essene community of Qumran. In addition to such major discoveries, many parts of which have yet to be published, other sources have gradually been coming to light or, after long suppression, are being circulated and studied.

As a result, Jesus is no longer a shadowy figure existing in the simplistic, fairy-tale world of the Gospels. Palestine at the advent of the Christian era is no longer a nebulous place belonging more to myth than to history. On the contrary, we now know a great deal about Jesus's milieu, and far more than most practising Christians realise about Palestine in the first century—its sociology, its economy, its politics, its cultural and religious character, its historical actuality. Much of Jesus's world has emerged from the haze of conjecture, speculation and mythic hyperbole, and is clearer and better documented than, say, the world of King Arthur. And although Jesus himself remains to a significant degree elusive, it is as possible to deduce plausible information about him as it is to deduce such information about Arthur, or Robin Hood.

THE FAILURE OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Despite all this, the hopeful prophecy which we quoted at the beginning of this book has not been fulfilled. Theologians of intellectual standing have not—at least, not publicly—come to share those conclusions, nor to be amazed at the credulity of their nineteenth-century predecessors. In certain quarters, dogma is, if any-

thing, more entrenched than ever. Despite the current problem of over-population, the Vatican can still impose its strictures on birth control and abortion—not on social or moral grounds, but on theological. A fire, caused by a bolt of lightning at York Minster, can still be regarded as evidence of divine wrath at the appointment of a contentious bishop. This bishop's ambiguous statements on aspects of Jesus's biography can still provoke outrage among people who refuse to believe anything but that their saviour was conceived by the Holy Spirit on a virgin. And in American communities, major works of literature can be banned from schools and libraries—or even, occasionally, burnt—for challenging traditional scriptural accounts, while a new current of fundamentalism can actually influence American politics through the support of millions eager to be raptured away to a heaven more or less interchangeable with Disneyland.

However unorthodox its presentation of Jesus, Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation* is a passionately religious, passionately devotional, passionately Christian work. Nevertheless, the novel was banned in many countries, including the author's native Greece, and Kazantzakis himself was excommunicated. Among non-fiction works, Schonfield's *The Passover Plot*, despite immense sales, provoked much bitter hostility.

In 1983, David Rolfe, working for London Weekend Television and Channel 4, began work on a three-part television documentary entitled *Jesus: the Evidence*. The series took no position of its own, endorsed no particular point of view. It simply endeavoured to survey the field of New Testament studies and to assess the value of various theories proposed. Yet even before the project got under way, British pressure groups were lobbying to have the enterprise suppressed. When it was finished, in 1984, it had to be screened, in a private showing, to a number of Members of Parliament before it could be cleared for transmission. And although subsequent reviews found it thoroughly sane and quite uncontroversial, clerics of the Church of England publicly announced that they would be on standby alert to deal with any members of their congregation upset by the programmes.

Jesus: the Evidence had sought to bring some of the advances in

New Testament scholarship to the attention of the lay public. Apart from *The Passover Plot*, virtually none of this scholarship has found its way into popular consciousness. A few works, such as *Jesus the Magician* and *The Gnostic Gospels*, have been widely reviewed, discussed and distributed, but their readership has been largely confined to people with a particular interest in their subject matter. Most of the work done in recent years has impinged only on specialists. Much of it is also written specifically for specialists, being virtually impenetrable to the uninitiated reader.

So far as the general public is concerned, as well as the churches who minister to that public, the works cited above might never have been produced. George Moore's depiction of Jesus as having survived the Crucifixion followed on from a contention maintained not only by some of the oldest heresies, but also by the Koran, and thus widely accepted throughout Islam and the Islamic world. And yet the same claim, when promulgated by Robert Graves, then by Dr Schonfield in *The Passover Plot*, attracted as much scandal and incredulity as if it had never been broached before. In the field of New Testament studies, it is as if each new discovery, each new assertion, is swallowed up as quickly as it can be made. Each must constantly be presented anew, only to disappear again. Many people reacted to certain assertions in our own book as if *The Passover Plot*, or Graves's *King Jesus*, or Moore's *The Brook Kerith*—or, for that matter, the Koran itself—had never been written.

This is an extraordinary situation, perhaps unique in the entire spectrum of modern historical research. In every other sphere of historical enquiry, new material is acknowledged. It may be disputed. Attempts may be made to suppress it. Alternatively, it may be digested and assimilated. But at least people know what has already been discovered, what has already been said twenty or fifty or seventy years ago. There is some species of genuine advance, whereby old discoveries and contentions, and a corpus of knowledge comes into being. Revolutionary theories may be accepted or discarded, but cognisance is at least taken of them and of what preceded them. A context exists. Cumulative contributions by successive generations of researchers create an increased

and increasing understanding. Thus do we acquire our knowledge of history in general, as well as of specific epochs and events. Thus do we acquire a coherent image of such figures as King Arthur, Robin Hood or Jeanne d'Arc. These images are constantly growing, constantly mutating, constantly being augmented by new material as it becomes available.

So far as the general public is concerned, New Testament history offers a striking contrast. It remains static, unaffected by new developments, new discoveries, new findings. Each controversial assertion is treated as if it were being made for the first time. Thus the Bishop of Durham's theological pronouncements produce as much of a shock-horror reaction as if the Bishop's own acknowledged precursor, Archbishop Temple, had never lived, never presided over the Anglican Church between the wars and never made essentially similar pronouncements.

Each contribution in the field of biblical research is like a footprint in sand. Each is covered almost immediately and, so far as the general public is concerned, left virtually without trace. Each must constantly be made anew, only to be covered again.

Why should this be? Why should biblical scholarship, which is pertinent to so many lives, be thus immune to evolution and development? Why should the great mass of believing Christians in fact know less about the figure they worship than about historical figures of far less relevance? In the past, when such knowledge was inaccessible or dangerous to promulgate, there might have been some justification. The knowledge today is both accessible and safely promulgated. Yet the practising Christian remains as ignorant as his predecessors of centuries ago; and he subscribes essentially to the same simplistic accounts he heard when he himself was a child.

A fundamentalist might well assert that the situation bears witness to the resilience and tenacity of Christian faith. We do not find such an explanation satisfactory. The Christian faith may indeed be resilient and tenacious. History has proved it to be so. But we are not talking about faith—which must necessarily be an intensely private, intensely subjective affair. We are talking about documented historical facts.

In the wake of the television series mentioned above, a panel discussion on the subject was transmitted. A number of distinguished commentators, most of them ecclesiastics, were assembled to evaluate the programmes and their implications. During the course of this panel discussion, several of the contributors agreed on one telling point. In the last year, the same point has been echoed not only by the Bishop of Durham, but also by the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was also a focus of debate at a subsequent synod of the Church of England.

According to several participants, the prevailing ignorance of New Testament scholarship is in large part the fault of the churches themselves and of the ecclesiastical establishment. Anyone in the ministry, anyone *training* for the *ministry*, is, as a matter of course, confronted with the latest developments in biblical research. Any seminarian today will learn at least something of the Dead Sea Scrolls, of the Nag Hammadi Scrolls, of the history and evolution of New Testament studies, of the more controversial statements made by both theologians and historians. *Yet this knowledge has not been passed on to the laity.* In consequence, a gulf has opened between ecclesiastics and their congregations. Among themselves, ecclesiastics have become eminently sophisticated and erudite. They react to the latest discoveries with blasé aplomb, remaining unruffled by theological controversy. They may find contentions such as those we have made questionable, but not surprising or scandalous. Yet nothing of this sophistication has been transmitted to their flock. The flock receives virtually no historical background from its shepherd—who is believed to be the definitive authority in such matters. When, in consequence, such background is presented by writers like ourselves, rather than by the official shepherd, it can often produce a reaction amounting to trauma, or a personal crisis of faith. Either we become regarded as gratuitously destructive iconoclasts, or the shepherd himself becomes suspect for having withheld information. The overall effect is precisely the same as if there were an organised conspiracy of silence among churchmen.

This, then, is the situation at present. On the one hand, there is the ecclesiastical hierarchy, steeped in what has been written in

the past, versed in all the latest aspects of biblical scholarship. On the other hand, there is the lay congregation, to whom biblical scholarship is totally unknown territory. The modern, more or less well-read cleric is acutely aware, for example, of the distinction between what is in the New Testament itself and what is an accretion of later tradition. He is aware of precisely how much—or, to be more accurate, how little—the scriptures actually say. He is aware of how much latitude, indeed, of how much necessity, there is for interpretation. For such a cleric, the contradictions between fact and faith, between history and theology, were personally confronted and resolved long ago. Such a cleric has long recognised that his personal belief is not the same thing as historical evidence, and he has affected some kind of personal reconciliation between the two—a reconciliation which, to a greater or lesser degree, manages to accommodate both. Such a cleric has generally 'heard it all before'. He is unlikely to be startled by the kind of evidence or hypothesis presented by us and by other writers. It will already have been familiar to him, and he will have formed his own conclusions long ago.

In contrast to the learned shepherd, the flock has not had occasion either to familiarise itself with the evidence in question or to confront the inconsistencies between scriptural accounts and the actual historical backdrop. For the devout Christian, there has been no need to reconcile fact and faith, history and theology, simply because he has never had any reason to believe a distinction between them might exist. He may not even have thought consciously of Palestine two thousand years ago as a very real place, precisely situated in space and time, subject to a confused welter of social, psychological, political, economic and religious factors—the same factors that operate in any 'real' locality, past or present. On the contrary, the story in the Gospels is often utterly divorced from all historical context—a narrative of stark, timeless, mythic simplicity enacted in a sort of limbo, a never-never-land of long ago and far away. Jesus, for example, appears now in Galilee, now in Judaea; now in Jerusalem, or on the banks of the Jordan. For the modern Christian, however, there is often no awareness of the geographical and political relation between

these places, how far they might be from each other, how long a journey from one to the other might take. The titles of various official functionaries are often meaningless. Romans and Jews mill confusingly in the background, like extras on a film set, and if one has any concrete image of them at all, it generally derives from one or another Hollywood spectacular—Pilate complete with Brooklynese accent.

For the lay congregation, scriptural accounts are regarded as literal history, a self-contained story no less true for being divorced from an historical context. Never having been taught otherwise by his spiritual mentors, many a devout believer has had no need to question the problems posed by such a context. When these problems are suddenly posed by a book such as ours, they will quite understandably assume the form of revelation, or of sacrilege. And we ourselves will instinctively be perceived as 'anti-Christian', as writers engaged in a fully fledged crusade which pits us, as militant adversaries, against the ecclesiastical establishment—as if we were personally bent on toppling the edifice of Christendom (and so naïve as to think such a feat possible).

OUR CONCLUSIONS IN PERSPECTIVE

Needless to say, we harbour no such intentions. We are not engaged in any sort of crusade. We have no particular desire to make 'converts'. We certainly are not deliberately trying to shake people's faith. In *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, our motivation was really quite simple. We had a story to tell, and the story seemed eminently worth the telling. We had been involved in an historical adventure as gripping as any detective tale or spy thriller. At the same time, the adventure had also proved immensely informative, uncovering vast tracts of our civilisation's past—and not just biblical—which we and our readers might not otherwise have had occasion to explore. It is a truism that a good story requires telling; it seems to have a life and momentum of its own, which demand expression. We wished to share our story, in much the

same way that one might tug a friend's arm and call his or her attention to a striking landscape, or a spectacular sunset.

Our conclusions about Jesus were an integral part of our adventure. Indeed, the adventure itself led us to them. We simply invited our readers to witness the process whereby it had done so. 'These are the conclusions we reached,' we said in effect. 'They are *our* conclusions, based on our own research, our own predispositions, our own framework, our own lack of preconceptions. We are not trying to foist them upon you. If they make sense to you, well and good. If not, feel free to discard them and draw your own. In the meantime, we hope you found your sojourn with us interesting, entertaining and informative.' And yet it was inevitable, given our subject matter, that we should find ourselves caught in the inherent conflict between fact and faith. A simple example should serve to illustrate the complexities and the paradoxes of this conflict.

In 1520, Hernán Cortés, advancing on the ancient Mexican capital of Tenochtitlán, was regarded as a god by the Aztecs. Never having seen firearms or horses before, the Aztecs regarded these things not only as supernatural, but as confirmation of Cortés's divine status—of his identity as an avatar of their supreme god, Quetzalcoatl. Today, of course, it is understandable how such a misconception can have occurred. Even to a Western European at the time, it would have been comprehensible. It is quite clear that there was nothing in any way divine about Cortés. And yet it is equally clear that in the minds of those who believed in his divinity, he was indeed a god.

Let us suppose that a modern Mexican Indian, perhaps with vestiges of an Aztec heritage, asserts that he *believes* in Cortés's divinity. It might seem to us somewhat peculiar, but we could not presume to challenge his belief—especially if his background, his education, his upbringing, his culture had all conduced to foster it. Moreover, his 'faith' might entail something much more profound than a mere conviction of Cortés's divinity. He might assert that he experienced Cortés within him, that he communed personally with Cortés, that Cortés appeared to him in visions, that through Cortés he approached oneness with God or with the sacred. How could we possibly challenge such assertions? What a man experiences in the privacy of his psyche, must of necessity remain inviolate and inviolable. And there are a great many people, quite sane, quite balanced, quite worthy of respect, who, in the privacy of their psyches, believe in things far stranger than the divinity of Hernán Cortés.

But the times in which Cortés lived, like the times in which Jesus lived, are documented. We know quite a bit about the historical context, the world in which both figures existed. This knowledge is not a matter of personal belief, but of simple historical fact. And if a man permits his personal belief to distort, alter or transform historical fact, he cannot expect others, whether or not they share his belief, to condone the process. The same principle obtains if a man permits his personal belief to derange dramatically the laws of probability and what we know of human nature. We could not, as we said, challenge a man who believed in Cortés's divinity, or who, in some manner or form 'experienced' Cortés within him. We could, however, challenge a man who asserted that, as a matter of historical fact, Cortés (like Quetzalcoatl) was born of an eagle and a serpent, or that Cortés was ordained to save the world, or that Cortés never died and now bides his time in some underground crypt awaiting a propitious moment to return and proclaim his sovereignty over Mexico. We could challenge a man who asserted that Cortés, even without his armour, was immune to spears and arrows, that he rode a horse through sea or sky, or that he used weapons which in reality were not invented until two centuries later.

It is not that established records of Cortés explicitly deny these things. They do not—for the simple reason that no such things were ever asserted about Cortés during his lifetime. But such things fly so flagrantly in the face of known history, so flagrantly in the face of human experience, so flagrantly in the face of simple probability, that they impose an inordinate strain upon credulity. As personal belief, they may be unimpugnable. But presented as historical fact, they rest on too improbable and too tenuous a basis.

Jesus poses a problem essentially analogous. We have no desire

to challenge anyone's personal faith, anyone's personal belief. We are not dealing with the Christ or Christos of theology, the figure who enjoys a very real and very puissant existence in the psyches and consciences of the faithful. We are dealing with a different figure, someone who actually walked the sands of Palestine two thousand years ago, just as Cortés trod the stones of the Mexican desert in 1519. We are dealing, in short, with the Jesus of history —and history, however vague and uncertain it may sometimes be, will still often brazenly defy our wishes, or myths, or mental images, our preconceptions.

In order to do justice to the Jesus of history, one must effectively divest oneself of preconceptions—and especially of the preconceptions fostered by subsequent tradition. One must be prepared to contemplate biblical material as dispassionately as one might contemplate chronicles pertaining to Caesar, or Alexander —or Cortés. And one must refrain from *a priori* acts of belief.

Indeed, it can be argued that the wisdom of believing or disbelieving is itself questionable. 'Belief' may well be a dangerous word, implying, as it does, an act of faith which may often be unwarranted. People are prepared to kill all too readily in the name of belief. At the same time, to disbelieve is as much an act of faith, as much an unsubstantiated assumption, as belief. Disbelief —as exemplified by the militant atheist or rationalist, for instance —is in itself another form of belief. To say that one does not believe in telepathy, or in ghosts, or in God is as much an act of faith as believing in them.

It is preferable to think in terms of knowledge. Ultimately, the issue is quite simple. Either one knows something, immediately, directly and at first hand, or one does not. A man who touches a hot stove does not need to believe in pain. He knows pain; he experiences pain; pain is a reality that cannot be doubted. A man who receives an electric shock does not ask himself whether he believes in the form of energy known as electricity. He experiences something whose reality cannot be denied, whatever the term one attaches to it. But if one is dealing with anything other than empirical knowledge of this kind—if, in short, one does not personally *know* in the sense just explained—the only honest

thing one can say is that one does not know. So far as the theological attributes accorded Jesus by Christian tradition are concerned, we simply do not know.

Within the general spectrum of 'things not known', virtually all things are possible. But on the basis of one's own experience, on the basis of human history and development, some of these are more possible than others, more or less likely, more or less probable than others. If one is honest, one can only acknowledge this situation—that all things are possible, but that some are more possible than others. It amounts to a simple balance of probabilities and plausibilities. What is more or less likely to have happened? What is more in accord with mankind's experience? In the absence of truly definitive knowledge about Jesus, it seems to us more likely, more probable, more in accord with our experience of humanity, that a man should have been married and tried to regain his rightful throne than that he should have been born of a virgin, walked on water and risen from his grave. And yet this conclusion, too, must, of necessity, remain tentative. It is a conclusion acknowledged as a more likely possibility, not embraced as a creed.

INTERPRETATION IN THE SERVICE OF BELIEF

As we have said, much is known today about the world in which Jesus lived, the Palestine of two thousand years ago. But so far as Jesus himself, and the events surrounding his life, are concerned, there *is* an absence of definitive knowledge. The Gospels, indeed the whole of the Bible, are sketchy documents, which no responsible scholar would for a moment consider absolutely reliable as historical testimony. Given this situation, one must perforce hypothesise, if one is not to remain mute. Granted, one must not hypothesise wildly; one must confine one's speculation to the framework of known historical data and probabilities. Within this framework, however, it is perfectly valid, and indeed necessary, to speculate—to interpret the meagre, opaque and often contradictory evidence that does exist. Most biblical scholarship involves

some degree of speculation. So, for that matter, do theology and the teachings of the churches. But while historical research speculates on the basis of historical fact, theology and clerical teachings speculate almost entirely on the scriptures themselves—often without any relation to historical fact.

People have argued, have slaughtered each other, have waged wars throughout the course of the last two thousand years over the way in which particular passages should be understood. In the coalescence of Christian tradition, there is one principle that has remained constant. In the past, when Church Fathers or other individuals were confronted with one of the various biblical ambiguities and contradictions, they *speculated* about its meaning. They attempted to *interpret* it. Once accepted, the conclusion of their speculation—that is, their interpretation—would become enshrined as dogma. Over the centuries, it then came to be regarded as established fact. Such conclusions are not fact at all. On the contrary, they are speculation and interpretation congealed into a tradition; and it is this tradition which is constantly mistaken for fact.

A single example should serve to illustrate the process. According to all four Gospels, Pilate affixes to Jesus's cross an inscription bearing the title 'King of the Jews'. Apart from this, the Gospels tell us virtually nothing. In John 6:15, there is a curious statement, that 'Jesus, who could see they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, escaped back to the hills by himself'.[4] And in John 19:21–22: 'So the Jewish chief priests said to Pilate, "You should not write 'King of the Jews', but 'This man said: I am King of the Jews.' " Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written." ' But there is no elaboration or elucidation of these passages. We are given no real indication of whether the title was warranted or not, official or not, recognised or not. Nor are we given any indication of how, precisely, Pilate intended the appellation to be understood. What was his motivation? What was his action intended to achieve?

At some point in the past, it was *assumed*, on the basis of speculative interpretation, that Pilate must have intended the title mockingly. To have assumed otherwise would have been to raise a

number of awkward questions. Today, most Christians blindly accept, as if it were a matter of established fact, that Pilate used the title in derision. But this is not established fact at all. If one reads the Gospels themselves, with no preconceptions whatever, there is nothing to suggest that the title was not used in all seriousness—was not perfectly legitimate and acknowledged as such by at least some of Jesus's contemporaries, including Pilate. So far as the Gospels themselves are concerned, Jesus may indeed have been King of the Jews—and/or been so regarded. It is only tradition that has persuaded people otherwise. To suggest that Jesus may actually have been King of the Jews is not, therefore, to stand at variance with the evidence. It is merely to stand at variance with a long established tradition—a long established system of beliefs based ultimately on someone's speculative interpretation. If anything stands at variance with the evidence, it is this system of beliefs. For in Matthew's account of Jesus's birth, the three 'wise men' ask, 'Where is the infant King of the Jews?' If Pilate intended the title to be derisive, what is one to make of the question of the magi? Did they, too, intend it as derisive? Surely not. Yet if they were referring to a legitimate title, why should not Pilate have been so as well?

The Gospels are documents of a stark, mythic simplicity. They depict a world stripped to certain bare essentials, a world of a timeless, archetypal, almost fairy-tale character. But Palestine, at the advent of the Christian era, was not a fairy-tale kingdom. On the contrary, it was an eminently real place, peopled by real individuals, such as one might find anywhere else in the world at any other time in history. Herod was not a king of obscure legend. He was a very real potentate, whose reign (37 to 4 B.C.) extends beyond its biblical context to overlap those of well known secular figures—of Julius Caesar, for instance, Cleopatra, Mark Antony, Augustus and other personages familiar to us from schoolbooks and even from Shakespeare. As we have said, Palestine in the first century, like any other place in the world, was subject to a complex welter of social, psychological, political, economic, cultural and religious factors. Numerous factions squabbled with each other and among themselves. Cabals manipulated and machi-

nated behind the scenes. Various parties pursued conflicting objectives, often making tenuous alliances with each other for the sole purpose of expediency. Deals were clandestinely arranged. Vested interests jockeyed for power. The populace at large, like the populace elsewhere and at other times, veered between apathetic torpor and hysterical fanaticism, between abject fear and fervent conviction. Little, if any, of this is conveyed by the Gospels—only a residue of confusion. And yet these currents, these forces, are essential for any understanding of the historical Jesus—the Jesus who actually walked the soil of Palestine two thousand years ago—rather than the Christ of faith. It was this Jesus that we endeavoured to discern and comprehend more clearly. To make such an endeavour is not to declare oneself anti-Christian.

THE CONTEXT

In the wake of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, when certain 'Christians' vehemently declared us to be anti-Christian, we could only shrug helplessly. We ourselves, it must be repeated, had no desire to assume the role of iconoclasts; we were simply caught in the conflict between fact and faith.

Nor, for that matter, did we regard the suggestions we made about Jesus as in any way shocking or outrageous. As the reader will have noted, virtually all the suggestions had been made before, most of them quite recently and in a well publicised way. Moreover, we were not alone. We were not concocting a cranky, hare-brained thesis calculated to produce an 'instant best-seller'. On the contrary, virtually all our suggestions were very much in the mainstream of contemporary biblical scholarship, and it was from precisely this scholarship that much of our research derived. We consulted the acknowledged experts in the field, many of whom were not known to the general public, and for the most part we did little more than synthesise their conclusions in a readily digestible fashion. These conclusions were already familiar enough to the ecclesiastical establishment, many of whom readily

accepted them. What they had failed to do was pass them on to the laity.

In private discussions, we met churchmen of many denominations. Few expressed any hostility to the conclusions in our book. Certain of them took issue with us on one or another specific point, but most found our general thesis plausible, even in some cases probable, and in no way diminishing the stature of Jesus or the Christian faith. Among lay Christians, however, the same conclusions seemed to entail blasphemy, heresy, sacrilege and almost every other religious sin on the register. It was this discrepancy of reaction that we found particularly striking and instructive. Churchmen, whom one would expect to be most militant about the matter, responded with anything from sceptical but unsurprised indifference to outright endorsement. Their flock responded with anything from horrified disillusion to vociferous outrage. Nothing could have made so apparent the failure of the churches to keep their congregations abreast of developments in the field of biblical scholarship.

All the same, there are signs that the situation is slowly beginning to change. It may well be, of course, that these signs are misleading or illusory, and that the pendulum will once again swing back in favour of 'simple faith', with the fruits of historical scholarship continuing to be ignored or suppressed. In that respect, the contagion of American fundamentalism certainly augurs ill. Nevertheless, there are distinct signs of improvement in the air, so numerous as to amount, in their modest way, to a form of *Zeitgeist*—a spirit, or current, or movement, abroad in the world.

During the years of our research, numerous other publications were already in circulation, helping to create a favourable climate. In the 1970s, at least two novels, one of them a serious and well reviewed work of literature, postulated the discovery of Jesus's mummified body. Another popular novel called the Gospels into question by suggesting the existence of a new corpus of first-hand scriptural accounts—and this book was made into a television mini-series. In his monumental opus *Terra Nostra*—certainly one of the dozen or so most important novels to be published in any

language since the Second World War—the respected Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes depicted Jesus as surviving the Cross by means of a fraudulent crucifixion involving a substitute. At least one novel, *Magdalene* by Carolyn Slaughter, presented the Magdalene as Jesus's lover. And Liz Greene, drawing on some of our own research, wrote of a bloodline descended from Jesus in *The Dreamer of the Vine*, a novel about Nostradamus published in 1980.

So far as more academic scholarship was concerned, the Nag Hammadi Scrolls appeared for the first time in English translation in 1977, and within two years had inspired Elaine Pagels's best-seller *The Gnostic Gospels*. Morton Smith had disclosed his findings about the early church in *The Secret Gospel*, following it with his controversial portrait in *Jesus the Magician*. Haim Maccoby addressed himself to the historical Jesus in *Revolution in Judaea*, as did Geza Vermes in such works as *Jesus the Jew*. And Hugh Schonfield's on-going series of studies of first-century Palestine was appearing at regular intervals through the 1970s. On a theological level, a number of Anglican clerics provoked considerable controversy by questioning Jesus's divinity in a collection of essays, *The Myth of God Incarnate*. And it is also worth noting a curious, unsubstantiated but fascinating book, *The Jesus Scroll*, by an Australian writer, Donovan Joyce.

By 1982, then, when *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* appeared in print, the waters had already been disturbed by a fresh wave of material pertaining to the historical Jesus. True, many people still did not know the extent to which, for example, the Gospels contradict each other. Or that there are Gospels other than those in the New Testament, which were more or less arbitrarily excluded from the canon by councils composed of eminently mortal, eminently fallible men. Or that Jesus's divinity had been decided by vote at the Council of Nicaea, some three centuries after Jesus himself had lived. True, too, fundamentalism is still rabid in America. And, as we observed earlier, there are still people in Britain who can ascribe a fire caused by lightning in York to God's wrath at the appointment of a somewhat outspoken bishop—as if, amid the violence, hatred, prejudice, insensitivity and menace of the mod-

ern world, God had nothing more pressing on His mind, nothing better to do with His resources. And there are still people who can shout blasphemy or heresy and demand the same bishop's resignation when he makes so self-evident, common-sense a statement as that the Resurrection cannot be definitively 'proved'. Nevertheless, there is something 'in the air', of which the bishop himself is a manifestation.

It would be disingenuous on our part to pretend ignorance of our book's impact, both in sales and controversy. For the first time since Hugh Schonfield's *Passover Plot* in 1963, certain questions pertaining to the New Testament, to Jesus and to the origins of Christianity, were raised to the general reading public—to the so-called 'mass market', rather than to a cadre of academic specialists and theologians. And it became apparent that the general reading public was not only prepared, but positively eager, to listen.

Neither television nor the publishing establishment was blind to the possibilities. Since 1982, a number of new books have appeared. In 1983, *The Illusionist*, a novel by Anita Mason, offered a controversial but historically valid perspective on the coalescence of the early Church; it was short-listed for the Booker Prize, Britain's most prestigious literary award. In 1985, Anthony Burgess, perhaps even more controversially, explored much the same territory in *The Kingdom of the Wicked*. An incipient storm was provoked by Michele Roberts's novel *The Wild Girl*. Drawing, as we did, on evidence in the Nag Hammadi Scrolls, Michele Roberts depicts the Magdalene as Jesus's lover and as the mother of his child. On its paperback publication in 1985, *The Wild Girl* provoked dire fulminations not only from the expected pressure groups, but also from a would-be Torquemada in Parliament; and, until rather more sane judgments prevailed, the book was threatened with prosecution under Britain's antediluvian blasphemy law. In the meantime, Robert Graves's *King Jesus*, which makes assertions no less scandalous, was reissued for the first time since 1962, in a readily accessible paperback edition. (Graves's book, presumably, was too opaque for the self-appointed custodians of thought who objected to Michele Roberts. Or perhaps established

literary figures enjoy a certain immunity from such cranky zeal: It might reasonably be argued that the single most inflammatory portrayal of Jesus anywhere is in D. H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*, published more than fifty years ago, a miniature masterpiece in which Jesus is depicted as having what used to be called 'sexual congress' with a priestess of Isis in an Egyptian temple. At the climactic moment, he declares, 'I am risen!').

Among biblical studies geared towards a non-specialist audience, two of Hugh Schonfield's books have been reissued, while a new one, *The Essene Odyssey*, appeared in 1985. The works of Morton Smith and Elaine Pagels have all been released in quality paperback editions. In television and cinema, there have been dramatisations (albeit glossy and uncontroversial) of the Siege of Masada and the dispute between Peter and Paul. More significantly, Karen Armstrong, a former nun, challenged established Christian tradition in an intelligent, well researched and lucidly presented series on Saint Paul, entitled *The First Christian*. As we have already noted, David Rolfe did likewise in his widely publicised series *Jesus: the Evidence*, which was followed by a book bearing the same title.' And in *The Sea of Faith*, Don Cupitt, Lecturer in Divinity and Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, presented perhaps the most penetrating television study yet undertaken of Christianity today—a study containing statements far more contentious than those of the Bishop of Durham.

We would not presume to claim that *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* in itself necessarily influenced any of these works. Indeed, some of the individuals cited above would unquestionably find themselves at odds with certain of our conclusions. But we would like to think that the success of our book rendered both publishers and television producers more aware of the audience for material pertaining to the historical Jesus and the origins of Christianity—an audience whose appetite makes such books and films viable. The emergence of this audience constitutes an extremely significant new development. It also places a new and salutary responsibility on the churches, rendering increasingly untenable the kind of patronising censorship hitherto practised by churchmen with their congregations. If, as in the past, shepherds withhold information

from their flock, the flock will no longer acquiesce in the process. It will turn instead to books and television.

If we are correct in this assumption, we do have a basis for feeling gratified. Not, it must be repeated, because we are on a crusade. Not because we have a vested interest, personal or impersonal, in challenging, compromising or embarrassing the ecclesiastical establishment. But because we, too, live in the modern world. We are aware of, and affected by, the pressures of that world. We are vulnerable, like everyone else, to prejudice, and are conscious of how much havoc bigotry, the excesses of blind faith, and the tyranny which often accompanies it, can inflict on the world. It is to our benefit, as it is to everyone else's, that some measure of perspective should be restored.