

Book Review

Barbara Thiering, 1992

Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His Life Story
Toronto: Doubleday Canada

Jesus of the Apocalypse: The Life of Jesus After the Crucifixion
Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1995

The Book That Jesus Wrote: John's Gospel
Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1998

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

While browsing through a cardboard box full of "quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore," I recently happened upon a scrap book that I had compiled in the late 1950s. Among its motley treasures were certificates I had won in 1954 and 1955 for "perfect attendance" at my small, rural Presbyterian Church's Sunday School. I was then, I am sure, at the apex of my commitment to Christianity. A very few years later, I was expelled forever from the "wee kirk." The precipitating event was an uncommonly noisy argument that I had with some elders less over theology than politics. How, I asked, could these red meat and root vegetable followers of the Prince of Peace nod sanctimoniously in agreement with the admonition "Thou shalt not kill" and then endorse capital punishment? More broadly, how could they (cold warriors to the quick) sing "Peace on earth, good will to men" and simultaneously argue remorselessly for nuclear weapons? Finally, how could they declare their belief in the Calvinist notion of predestination of souls and, at the same time, pour out their hearts in praise of the virtues of individual liberty and free enterprise?

The dispute was neither new nor especially well-argued, but it was final. Or almost so. I subsequently spent a couple of years trying to take Jesus Christ (if not all of his followers) seriously but, after being weaned away by the likes of "existential" theologian Paul Tillich and "death of god" cleric John A. T. Robinson, the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, I finally chucked not only Christianity but all religious belief into my personal historical trash bin.

Of course, this does not mean that I lost interest. Religious fundamentalism in all its forms continues to appall me. More benign expressions of faith still intrigue me as psychological and sociological phenomena. The elaborate rituals and poetic expression of some oriental religious traditions remain aesthetically pleasing. And, in moments of sentimentality, I can feel compassion and admiration for many believers, irrespective of their particular beliefs. What worries me, however, is the question of how otherwise sensible people can be gulled into accepting the supernatural aspects of the life of the historical Jesus. True, some putative Christians have embarked on the revisionist project of reinterpreting such matters as the virgin birth, the several miracles and ultimately the resurrection as metaphors or mythic symbol representing an allegedly deeper truth without themselves being literally true. Such hedging,

however, increasingly seemed to me to be an evasion. Either Jesus was divine and rose from the dead or he wasn't and didn't. If the former, Christianity was validated; if the latter, it was reduced to a highly successful "opium of the masses" which perhaps owed more to St. Paul's organizing and negotiating skills than to any magic tricks performed by Jesus himself (as Saul Alinsky - a consummate political organizer but not a man known for his tact - once put it: "If it hadn't been for St. Paul, Jesus would have been just another guy hanging on a cross!").

But then along came Barbara Thiering. For over 20 years a scholar in the University of Sydney's School of Divinity and for the past decade a full-time researcher and author, Dr. Thiering is a world-renowned expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Her main thesis in all the books under review is this: "The virgin birth, the miracles, and the resurrection ... never were literal events ... nor were they myths, traditional legends as scholars have often held. Something really did happen, and what happened opens up a whole new understanding of historical Christianity."

The tools Dr. Thiering uses to unlock the mysteries and thus to demystify Christian dogma are not those of the logician, rhetorician or metaphysician. She does not debunk Biblical tales by bringing forward incontrovertible scientific evidence of their empirical absurdity. Instead, she employs the methods of the intellectual detective in the effort to interpret accurately the New Testament text. Her achievement has been to discern two levels of meaning in the sacred writings. One is "designed to inspire awe and fear in the 'babes in Christ'"; the other is an encrypted historical subtext which reveals a generally plausible account of the social, political and religious context in which Jesus and his comrades operated as well as the tactics they used to build their movement. Her application of the "peshar technique" permits not only the cogent retelling of events but also a presentation of what she believes to be their accurate chronology.

"The word peshar is used in the Old Testament," she explains, "to mean 'interpretation of dreams.'" It is, however, more like a codified key to a puzzle. She writes: "A rough analogy might be the solution to a cryptic crossword. The clues do not look as if they make sense, but anyone who knows the technique and has the necessary knowledge can solve the puzzle." For those who wish to explore further, her detailed explanation and application of the key (in some 304) pages is provided in *Jesus of the Apocalypse*.

The results are formidable. The entire New Testament is refashioned to display the political intrigue, doctrinal disputes and startling reconstructions of actual events. So, says Thiering, the "star" that guided the wise men to the birthplace of Jesus (at Qumran, not Bethlehem) "was Joseph, his father, who was the Star of David, leading the Magians, his political associates, to witness the fact that an heir to his dynasty had been born." The miracle of the "'raising of Lazarus' was a lifting of the excommunication of an expelled monk, who had 'died', because excommunication was treated as a spiritual death." The story of the feeding of the five thousand, she puckishly demonstrates, was not "intended ... to show Jesus as an extravagant wonderworker who would rather perform miracles than go and buy bread." It was, instead, a record "of the first ordinations to the Christian ministry ... [and] the beginning of an apostolic succession that goes on to the present day." Like the previous exercise of turning water into wine (i.e., allowing uncircumcised Gentiles to receive communion), the miracle of the bread was a conscious act of rebellion. Previously, within the sanctuary, holy men - priests and celibate laymen - were ceremoniously served bread by levites. So close was the association between levites and the loaves that levites came to be called "loaves". True priests and attendants had to be born of the

tribe of Levi, and so Jewish birth was a prerequisite for a minister of the Jewish religion. "But in March AD 32, at Ain Feshka," argues Thiering, "Jesus 'miraculously' transformed Gentile laymen of the lowest kind into 'loaves', ministers who could serve bread at communion. By 'eating the loaves,' they became 'loaves' themselves. They could officiate at Gentile services, where the congregation were ordinary Gentiles who thought of themselves as Christians, not Jews."

As for Jesus himself, Barbara Thiering shows him to have been twice married. His first wife was Mary Magdalene, who bore him a daughter and two sons but who left him - and Christianity - in 44 AD to join the Zealots, the radical Jewish nationalists who disdained the admonition to "give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" and sought instead to win independence for a Jewish state. Then in 50 AD, after his divorce, he married Lydia of Thyatira - "the seller of purple" mentioned in Acts 16. He did not die on the cross (also at Qumran, not Jerusalem) for the crucifixion was aborted on the pre-arranged signal, "I thirst", by the administration of a slow-acting snake poison which was subsequently expelled by purgatives within the burial cave. His actual death, most likely of natural causes, took place in seclusion, probably in Rome but possible in southern France sometime after 73 AD when Jesus was 80 or more (his real birth being fixed as sometime in March, 7 BC). His first son, Jesus Justus (born 37 AD), grandson Jesus III (born 77 AD) and great-grandson Jesus IV (born 114 AD) were left to carry on his political and religious mission.

What was that mission? I leave it to potential readers of these engaging volumes to peruse Thiering's account. Is she right? The jury is out and likely will remain so for a long time. She is certainly not the first to base a radical reinterpretation of the life of Christ on a reading of the dead sea scrolls. Numerous volumes of varying credibility have sought to rescue Jesus from supernaturalism by linking him in one case to desert fertility cults (John Allegro's *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*) and in another to the influences of Hellenistic philosophy (John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*). Each has had its detractors and its converts and Thiering is no exception. Some critics have been content to call her names and to insist that her "oddball" theories are just short of madness. Others complain that her meticulous attention to detail makes her work oppressively dull. So, whether from boredom or from being a latter day incarnation of "the Beast", Barbara Thiering has endeared herself neither to the established church nor to much of the mainstream mass media. Her innovative work is, nonetheless, a notable example of textual inquiry that has extraordinary parallels elsewhere.

Diplomats and Generals have long relied on secret messages (was it not Thomas Hobbes who proclaimed that "force and fraud in war are the two cardinal virtues"?). From early Roman times to the current age of information technology, codes and ciphers have allowed communications to be kept safe from enemies. So, just as the deciphering of the Zimmerman telegram or the crack of the Enigma machine had a profound effect on 20th century history, so Barbara Thiering's persuasive application of the peshet technique has the potential to be equally consequential for the history of Christian thought.

Intrinsically important to anyone concerned with the history of western civilization and gripping as a bold rewriting of the occident's predominant religious tradition, Thiering's contributions may not live up to the dust jacket hype of being "as profound as that of Darwin's *Origin of Species* on theories of evolution," but they are well worth the read. If nothing else, they may stir interest in

what the current generation of secrecy mongers are doing. Whereas the true meaning of the Gospels or the scheming of modern spymasters may have less than universal appeal, according to Laurence A. Marschall, contributing editor of *The Sciences*, "in the age of disposable computing, encryption has become everybody's business." As Marschall recently put it: "computer technology ... can mathematically transform a bit-stream in an eye blink, and so the encrypting and decrypting takes place virtually without the user's even being aware that it is going on." So, government and business regularly secure digital messages with a chip, while ordinary folk encounter the new technology in their cable television boxes, their debit cards and their marvelously integrated telephones, data links and video channels. There is a strange and wondrous line that runs from the Book of Revelations through Bletchly Park to the current cleverness of asymmetric cryptography. Anyone interested would do well to read simultaneously the apparently ecstatic ramblings of St. John the Divine and a useful new volume by Whitfield Diffie and Susan Landau entitled *Privacy on the Line: The Politics of Wiretapping and Encryption* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998). Which you regard as the scarier will, if naught else, provide a modest basis for self-analysis; what's more, if Thiering's theory is correct, then The New Testament wins the prize for creativity hands-down.

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