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FUMUS ET SPECULA: GOD AND MAMMON IN THE JESUS-BOOK INDUSTRY. A REVIEW ARTICLE BASED ON CARSTEN PETER THIEDE & MATTHEW D'ANCONA, EYEWITNESS TO JESUS: AMAZING NEW MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF THE GOSPELS. DOUBLEDAY, NEW YORK & LONDON, 1996. ISBN 0-385-48051-2. Pp. XI + 206. FOURTEEN PLATES. \$US 23.95. ALSO PUBLISHED IN THE U.K. AS THE JESUS PAPIRUS. WEIDENFELD AND NICOLSON (1996) £16.99 ISBN 0-297-81658-6.

For Bruce M. Metzger

Dr Henry Innis McAdam

“So the disciples went ahead and did what Jesus had told them to do: they brought the donkey and the colt, threw their cloaks over them, and Jesus got on.”

Matthew 21:6-7

An aura of sensationalism has surrounded the subject of this book since Britain's prestigious *Times* ran a front page story on 24 December 1994 announcing that the library at Magdalen College, Oxford University possessed "... the oldest extant fragment[s] of the New Testament ...". The focus of that report was three tiny scraps of papyrus acquired through an alumnus donation in 1901. Each fragment is the size of a postage stamp, and all contain Greek lettering identified as portions of the *Gospel of Matthew*. The text appears on the front (*recto*) and back (*verso*) of the three fragments, yielding a total of six or seven dozen legible letters. The complete document was a codex or early form of a book rather than a scroll. The three scraps at Oxford now have the official designation of *Papyrus Magdalen Greek 17*.

This "Christmas exclusive" was written by Matthew d'Ancona, then a Deputy Editor of the *Times*, now an Associate Editor of London's *Sunday Telegraph*. His source for the piece was Carsten Peter Thiede, a German papyrologist who had become interested in the Magdalen College scraps during a family visit to Oxford the previous February. The *Times* reported Thiede's claim that the A.D. 180-200 date assigned to the Magdalen fragments more

MacAdam, Book Review Article, *IBS* 19, Jan 1997 than forty years ago is at least a century too late. Thiede contended that the Magdalen remnants of *Matthew* 26:7-33 were written before A.D. 70 and perhaps as early as the middle of the first century A.D., i.e. only two decades after the Roman execution of Jesus of Nazareth. Thiede's argument for that astonishingly early date, as reported in the *Times*, was based on palaeographic comparison with other documents of the first century A.D.

Just over twenty years ago Fr. José O'Callaghan argued that a similar scrap of Greek papyrus (7Q5) from the Qumran/Dead Sea material contained snippets of *Mark* 6:52-53. That has been hotly disputed, but it is now safe to say that even more heat will be generated by Thiede's claims for the Magdalen Library fragments. Since the publication of the *Times* article Thiede has set out his views for scholarly discussion in the German journal *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* Vol. 105 (1995) pp. 13-20 & Tafel IX. The volume under review expands on that for non-specialists. Both the article and the book press the claim set forth in the *Times* that the Magdalen Library fragments date from before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and that the period in which the Gospels appeared in written form is therefore several decades earlier than previously believed.

Here is how this claim is presented in the opening chapter of *Eyewitness to Jesus*, referring back to d'Ancona's *Times* story and Thiede's article for *ZPE*:

"Not since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 had there been such a potentially important breakthrough in biblical research. Thiede appeared to have found evidence that the St. Matthew Gospel was written only a generation after the Crucifixion--or even earlier. The papyrus itself, unearthed in Upper Egypt and bequeathed to Magdalen in 1901, might conceivably have been read or handled by one of the "five hundred brothers and sisters" (1 *Corinthians* 15:6) whom St. Paul declares to have seen the resurrected Jesus with their own eyes. It was a claim that nobody with an interest in Christianity--spiritual or scholarly--could possibly ignore." (p. 3)

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While d'Ancona fielded the flood of telephone calls and the correspondence generated by his piece in the *Times*, Thiede went "on the road" with his message:

"In his scholarly travels around the world [1995], Thiede discovered that his research had made an impact upon ordinary people, fascinated by the questions it posed to them about the relationship between history and faith, religion and empiricism. They were enthralled that the fragments might have been read by men and women who had walked with Jesus through Galilee and wept as the storm [*sic*] gathered above the Cross on Golgotha" (p. 4)

Ancient historians, biblical scholars and papyrologists were less "enthralled". Thiede's *ZPE* article was quickly rebutted in that same journal by Klaus Wachtel under the title: "P 64/67: Fragmente des Matthäusevangeliums aus dem 1. Jahrhundert?" (*ZPE* 107 [1995] 73-80). Reference to it is relegated to an aside (pp. 61-2) and an endnote (p. 176 note #50) in *Eyewitness to Jesus*. One can understand the haste with which d'Ancona and Thiede try to minimize Wachtel's critique. After six closely-argued pages in which Thiede's main arguments are disputed point by point (even to the discussion of comparison of specific letter-forms in the Magdalen and Barcelona fragments with those in other documents), Wachtel concludes:

"Es is in jeder Wissenschaft förderlich, sich von Zeit zu Zeit ihrer materialen Grundlagen zu vergewissern. Thiedes Argumentation für eine Datierung des P 64/67 ins 1. Jahrhundert ist jedoch als methodisch unzulänglich und sachlich falsch zurückzuweisen. Die herkömmliche Datierung in die Zeit um 200 hingegen hat sich als gut begründet erwiesen." (*ZPE* 107 [1995] 80)

Dismissing such an indictment as little more than "... a form of intellectual resistance which can not last" (*Eyewitness* p. 62), d'Ancona and Thiede then go on to assert that their book

is a response to the flood of interest in the Magdalen Papyrus. It is neither a religious tract nor an exercise in Christian persuasion. Instead, it seeks to make accessible to the general reader a major papyrological discovery and its implications for the dating of the New Testament and our knowledge of early Christianity. It seeks to bridge the gap between scientific investigation and the questions which

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every thinking person must ask about the Gospels and their significance. It seeks to promote debate as much as to answer questions definitively (p. 5).

Just what is meant by this “gap” is not made clear, though I get the feeling after reading their book that it is the public at large and not the world of “scientific investigation” to whom the authors are turning for acceptance. Just what “evidence” is there that would allow them to suggest such an early date for *Matthew*? The presentation of their argument is done in a rather awkward way. Instead of following a short introductory chapter with some background information on how and when the Magdalen scraps came to Oxford, the reader must first wade through more than 60 pages on “St. Matthew and the Controversy over the Origins of the New Testament” (Chap. 2) and “Investigating the Magdalen Papyrus” (Chap. 3). Let us move ahead first to their account of how the papyrus got to Oxford: “The Discovery of a Lifetime” (Chap. 4).

The three scraps had been acquired in Luxor, Egypt by the Rev. Charles B. Huleatt, a Magdalen alumnus who served as the Anglican chaplain at Luxor from 1893-1901. Huleatt thought they dated to the third century, but the librarian to whom they were sent was advised they might be *fourth* century. That advice came from Arthur Hunt, a fellow alumnus of Magdalen and collaborator (with Bernard Grenfell, of Queen’s College, Oxford) on the then-new Oxyrhynchus Papyri project. The publication of that archive (sixty-one volumes to date) is still underway as this century draws to a close.

Huleatt never saw his *Matthew* fragments again. He and his family perished when the great earthquake of 28 December 1908 destroyed the city of Messina (Sicily) where they had resided after leaving Egypt in 1901. His bequest wasn’t given any special attention until after World War II. The first editor was Colin H. Roberts, a British papyrologist who had identified and dated the famous fragment of the *Gospel of John* (P. Rylands Gk. # 457) in the John Rylands Manuscript Library (now Rylands Library of the University of Manchester); see his *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel* (1935). Roberts dated the Rylands fragment to about A.D.

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120 and it is still regarded by most New Testament scholars as the earliest extant segment of any Gospel.

In the early 1950s the three Magdalen fragments were brought to Roberts' attention. After researching the library's records he observed that "It is probable that there were further fragments of the same leaf since a letter by Mr. Huleatt to the Librarian [of Magdalen College] refers to purchases of fragments from the same manuscript in successive years" (*Harvard Theological Review* 46 [1953] 233). Neither Thiede's *ZPE* article nor *Eyewitness to Jesus* makes any mention of that statement and its suggestion that Huleatt had bought more than the three scraps attributed to him.

Indeed, Roberts later *did* identify another two papyrus fragments of this same Matthew codex in a Spanish publication. They had been identified as parts of *The Gospel of Matthew* (Mt 3:5; 3:15; 5:20-22; 5:25-28) and were edited by Ramón Roca-Puig, *Un Papiro Griego del Evangelio de San Marco* (1956) They are known officially as *P. Barc. Inv. # 1* and are in the possession of the Fundación San Lucas Evangelista in Barcelona. As far as I know, no connection to Charles Huleatt has ever been established. Their provenance, incredibly, is totally ignored by Roca-Puig. Thiede and d'Ancona discuss these at some length (pp. 64-70), though it is evident that Roca-Puig accepted Roberts' dating of c. 200 for *all* the Matthew codex fragments. Several attempts to connect the Magdalen and Barcelona fragments with others (e.g. with *P. Suppl. Gr. # 1120* in Paris) have so far proved fruitless.

Though Roberts could not date the Magdalen fragments with anything approaching precision, he took issue with the original assigned date of third or fourth century A.D. That was because

... it has been recognized for some time that Grenfell and Hunt were unduly conservative in their dating of some early Christian papyri, largely because they accepted the assumption common to palaeographers of the last century that a manuscript written in a codex could not be earlier than the third century ... it should be remembered that when Hunt saw the [Magdalen] papyrus in 1901 relatively few Biblical papyri had been published and the development of Greek

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palaeography was less clear than it has since become ... (*HTR*
46 [1953] 234-5).

Roberts then went on to conclude that "In its strong and firm lines and in spite of certain angularities the hand of the papyrus may be regarded as an early predecessor of the so-called 'Biblical Uncial', a hand 'whose peculiar style began to form towards the end of the second century'" (*ibid.* 235). It is very important to emphasize that last statement, which Roberts credits in note #7 on that page to "W. Schubart, *Griechisch Paläographie*, p. 136". The closest that Thiede and d'Ancona come to reproducing that is quoting (*Eyewitness* p. 65) Roberts' own paraphrase of it:

... the hand in which the text [of the Magdalen/Barcelona papyrus] is written is a carefully written book hand that may be regarded as a precursor of the style commonly known as Biblical Uncial (see a "Complementary Note" in Ramón Roca-Puig, *Un Papiro Griego del Evangelico de San Mateo* [2nd ed., Barcelona, 1962] 59-60).

Thiede and d'Ancona give emphasis to Roberts' choice of the term "precursor", but fail to acknowledge that Schubart's late second century dating for biblical uncials undermines the stated belief in *Eyewitness to Jesus* "... that the Magdalen Papyrus and its two sister fragments in Barcelona should be dated to the first century A.D., toward [*sic*] A.D. 70 or even earlier ..." (p. 106). In fact they resist coming to grips with that all-important issue throughout the book. Where discussion is called for, they choose to side-track the reader. This is most evident in their reaction to criticism leveled at Thiede for not citing (prior to *Eyewitness*) Guglielmo Cavallo's standard and magisterial work on biblical texts *Ricerche sulla Maiuscola Biblica* (Fiorenza, 1967): "... it was claimed that [Thiede] had overlooked [Cavallo], who states that this particular style [biblical uncial] was late, not early" (p. 106). Again but in greater detail they state

Applied to the Magdalen Papyrus, the category biblical uncial sounds good ... Thus those critics who drew attention to the biblical uncial and to ... Cavallo's standard textbook on this style appeared to have a point. But the redating had not ignored Cavallo or the biblical uncial; it had been carried out

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in the spirit of objective analysis. The weakness of previous estimates was clear: certain key assumptions had persisted out of respect for tradition rather than because they were logically defensible. The question was: What really is the closest possible approximation--the demonstrable result of applied comparison or the most attractive and familiar category? (*Eyewitness* 114).

Such dissembling and pussyfooting continues into the two footnotes associated with that paragraph, notes # 10 and # 11 on p. 180. In note # 11 Graham Stanton is singled out for criticisms of Thiede in *Gospel Truth? New Light on Jesus and the Gospels* (1995) 14 where Stanton questions why Colin Roberts' late second century dating is doubted. The reply to this? "Stanton, in any case, misses the point of [Thiede's] original article [uncited], which was to explore fresh arguments rather than to criticize old ones." That approach, to employ a "smoke and mirrors" technique, imbues the entire text of *Eyewitness*. This means that in place of an open debate the reader finds circular arguments and flim-flam. We are nowhere near the fulfillment of the clear statement of the book's intent noted above: "It seeks to promote debate as much as to answer questions definitively" (*Eyewitness*, p. 5).

I have devoted much attention to the matter of what century the style of handwriting represents because it is central to the dating of the Magdalen fragments. If d'Ancona and Thiede cannot make a compelling argument for a pre-A.D. 70 date on that point, it is impossible to see how related aspects will persuade anyone with some knowledge of dating criteria. Choosing a "popular" book style as a forum for a subject embracing such esoteric, academic disciplines as papyrology, biblical text transmission, philology, and palaeography is odd to say the least.

Stranger still is the U.K. publication of a very "patchwork" collection of Thiede's articles, entitled *Rekindling the Word: In Search of Gospel Truth* (Fowler Wright, 1996). One of that group deals with the Magdalen scraps (translated into English from the German original). That volume has been reviewed (rather gingerly) by A.E. Harvey in the *Times Literary Supplement* (22 March 1996 p. 6). Thiede's *ZPE* exposition addressed exactly the audience that P.

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Mag. Gk. 17 demands: those scholars whose critical opinion is absolutely essential to ensure that controversial claims can be substantiated. As noted above, a rejoinder to Thiede's piece has already appeared in that journal. It seems unlikely that similar publications will be any more sympathetic, and for the very same reasons. One need only recall that J.A.T. Robinson's *Redating the New Testament* (1976) was a valiant but decidedly vain attempt to retroject the entire NT canon to the period before the fall of Jerusalem.

Eyewitness to Jesus does nothing to advance Thiede's claim, and much to subvert it. The flawed methodology, the oblique and often opaque argumentation, lack of a proper *apparatus criticus*, and the proclivity to engage in parenthetical or otherwise irrelevant discussions are clearly indicative to me that subterfuge has been substituted for substance. It is very obvious that our attention is purposely being diverted. Let us look at some specific examples. A discussion of the known facts concerning the provenance of the Magdalen papyrus is relegated to chapter four, and even then the authors fail to note that Huleatt may have acquired more than the three fragments he sent to Oxford. The photographs of those fragments appear in two half-plates, *verso* in the top half, *recto* in the bottom half. None is numbered and all are difficult to see clearly without the aid of a magnifying glass. By way of contrast the photo of the Qumran Greek manuscript fragment 7Q5 is so large and clear (it occupies an entire plate) that the horizontal and vertical alignment of papyrus strips can be seen!

Eyewitness contains no transcriptions of the texts on the various Magdalen fragments. This is a deliberate omission since Thiede's *ZPE* article provided clear transcriptions of the Greek. Readers are offered instead translations of the relevant portions of *Matthew 26*. Without any hesitation, the authors defend this unconscionable procedure by saying:

It may facilitate our stroll through this colorful but confusing thicket if we read the translated English text of these fragments from St. Matthew 26 first, quoting the *New Jerusalem Bible* ... In printing this translation, we have not tried to copy the line divisions of the Greek fragments or the

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fragmentary character of words at the beginnings or ends of some lines; and, needless to say, since Greek syntax differs markedly from English syntax, the order of words within the sentences is different as well ... But this provides a workable idea of what is in these fragments ... (*Eyewitness* pp. 56; 57).

“Needless to say” it is then impossible to follow arguments (p. 58) regarding alleged abbreviations of *nomina sacra* (such as IHCOC = IC̄, KYPIOC = K̄C̄) on several fragments, or the numerical abbreviation IB for *dōdeka* on one fragment. It is clear that the authors find it very advantageous to reverse the usual procedure by working back *from* a standard translation *to* their theoretical proposal of what the Magdalen scraps actually contain. This may fool the reader or the reviewer with no knowledge of how textual analysis is done, but it is a blatant violation of the rules of scholarly debate. This isn’t a “stroll” through a “thicket” but an opportunity to enter a hall of mirrors at the end of which is a smoke-filled *cul-de-sac*. A sign should warn: *CAVEAT LECTOR*.

The very fact that the fragments are from a codex format of Matthew, and the text may contain abbreviations of *nomina sacra*, militates against a first-century date for *P. Mag. Gk. 17* as well as the Barcelona papyrus scraps. So does their provenance in the interior of Egypt. It is one thing to argue that the fragment of a Greek papyrus scroll from Qumran (7Q5) may be a portion of the *Gospel of Mark* dating before A.D. 70, and another to argue that fragments of a Greek codex of the *Gospel of Matthew* from Upper Egypt are of that same date. It should be noted that Thiede has been a strong supporter of Fr. O’Callaghan’s belief that 7Q5 is a portion of *Mk. 6:52-53*: this is set out in an article for *Biblica* 65 (1984) 538-59 and in his *Die älteste Evangelien-Handschrift?: Das Markus-Fragment von Qumran und die Anfänge der schriftlichen Überlieferung des Neuen Testaments* (1986).

However much he champions that cause (which continues today to attract some support) or refers to the papyrus discoveries at Herculaneum, Thiede’s (and d’Ancona’s) reliance on them must be seen as a counsel of despair. Dating arguments based on analyses of palaeographical similarities are notoriously unreliable. Just the fact that every legible *sigma* in the Magdalen papyrus (I can count six in

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Thiede's *ZPE* photographs) is lunate (C) in shape is an additional reason to date the fragments in the second century. In photos of the fragments (I have not seen the scraps myself) I count only about fifty clearly legible letters, perhaps a third of the total on all six sides. From such a small sample one needs more faith than I have to argue the question of date. The papyri from Herculaneum were recovered in unusual circumstances: a very controlled archaeological context sealed by volcanic deposits. I would not guarantee, as Thiede and d'Ancona would have it, that a similar situation obtained in the Qumran caves. Fragment 7Q5 may very well be from the *Gospel of Mark*, but to insist that the cave in which it and other papyrus scraps were found had been somehow hermetically sealed from intrusion after A.D. 70 is not wise.

The tiny quantity of the Magdalen Papyrus fragments and the uncertain circumstances of their provenance are (unfortunately) the prime ingredients for maximum speculation. Perhaps a rule of historical research is at work here: hypotheses expand in number and complexity in inverse proportion to the amount of credible documentation available. That is not the only "maxim" we need to note: supporting one uncertainty by invoking a second of equal or greater uncertainty is another. Thiede and D'Ancona argue from alleged fragments of the New Testament at Qumran that the Magdalen and Barcelona fragments of the *Gospel of Matthew* are also pre-A.D. 70. Such circular reasoning goes nowhere unless the reader does not recognize it as such. Without doubt *Eyewitness to Jesus* will persuade and even convince some who mistake its shell-game manner of presentation for a scientific evaluation of evidence. Clearly it retails a position established and maintained by presumption, a position which ignores the probative method of open debate.

It may not be amiss to say a few words about this procedure because questionable New Testament research has attracted more than its usual share of public attention in the past decade. The high-profile "Jesus Seminar", founded by Robert Funk in 1985, has been central to the commercial aspect of this. In some ways it's become a theological "lightning-rod", drawing bolts of criticism from both fundamentalists and liberals. The Jesus Seminar's very *raison d'être*,

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its methodology and its publications (individually or collectively) have just received a thorough (and disapproving) appraisal by a mainstream biblical scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, in *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (Harper San Francisco, 1996). Serious New Testament scholarship is well-served by it.

Johnson does not confine himself to just a critique of the Jesus Seminar or its academic staff. He ranges far and wide over the past decade, embracing a broad spectrum of publications which focus on some aspect of earliest Christianity: Jesus, Paul, the formation of the Gospels, Christian communities and their alleged relationship to the Essenes in general or to the Khirbet Qumran settlement in particular, the development of the New Testament canon, Gnosticism and other varieties of early Christianity, and the extra-canonical corpus (apocryphal writings of all sorts). He includes a brief aside (*The Real Jesus* p. 78), and not at all in a complimentary manner, on a *Time* magazine story entitled "A Step Closer to Jesus?" (23 January 1995) about the Magdalen fragments.

For the most part Johnson's concern is to analyze the main features of this "Jesus phenomenon" and to expose the sometimes ludicrous manifestations of shabby scholarship aided and abetted by editors and publishers eager to cash in on controversy which those very authors and an uncritical media generate and sustain. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993) was the Seminar's first collective report and therefore gets plenty of attention from Johnson (*The Real Jesus* pp. 20-27). Beyond that he examines recently-published works promoted as the vanguard of "historical Jesus research" in an attempt to isolate or identify the salient features of this genre of biblical lore. Much of Johnson's energy is then devoted to defending mainstream religious scholarship, and traditional Christianity, from what he understands as the central purpose of the Seminar and its devoted adherents:

... the agenda of the Seminar is not disinterested scholarship, but a social mission against the way in which the church controls the Bible, and the way in which the church is dominated by a form of evangelical and eschatological theology ..." (*The Real Jesus*, p. 6).

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For those who have no knowledge of the history of this genre of literature, Johnson's assessment of it in *The Real Jesus* may seem more comprehensive than his specifically limited intention. As far back as the 1960s several biblical scholars with solid and sometimes international reputations began to produce a series of publications which eventually relegated them to the far edges of respectability within their field of research. There was nothing like the Seminar to draw individuals together. Jesus was boldly presented as a deluded schemer (*The Passover Plot*, 1966) or as a card-carrying revolutionary (*Jesus and the Zealots*, 1968) or as a charismatic magician (*The Secret Gospel*, 1973) or as the earthly manifestation of a pre-Islamic Arabian fertility god (*Conspiracy in Jerusalem: The Hidden Origins of Jesus*, 1988). Christianity itself was "reinterpreted" in several radical and revisionist "studies", ranging from a characterization of it as a psychedelic cult (*The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, 1970) to "unlocking" its hidden origins as the religious step-child of a Qumran sectarian movement (*Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 1992).

None of this has gone unnoticed. In his magisterial and well-received study *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsamene to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*. (2 vols., Doubleday, (1994), Raymond Brown devoted a whole section (pp. 1092-6) to this topic, which he accurately entitled "imaginative Rewriting that Nullifies the Crucifixion." His own summary is worth quoting in full:

The survey above shows that there is not likely to be much new under the sun in such exercises of the imagination.

These theories demonstrate that in relation to the passion of Jesus, despite the popular maxim, fiction is stranger than fact -- and often, intentionally or not, more profitable" (p. 1096).

All of these books share one feature in common: each wants to be taken seriously as biblical scholarship even if its theme or focus or central argument is quite controversial and cannot be supported by a close scrutiny of what each adduces as "evidence." Every book mentioned above was written by a scholar or academic. Somewhat like Matthew's Jesus, these authors want to straddle *two* donkeys, hoping that such an awkward position will go unnoticed amidst the

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approval of an enthusiastic reception. *Eyewitness to Jesus* is no exception to that wishful thinking, although its own scope is narrow in comparison. Thiede and d'Ancona want to assign an exceptionally early date to the Magdalen Matthew fragments. To do so they base their argument on palaeographical analyses that are at best extremely ambiguous and at worst little more than an example of pseudo-scholarly *trompe l'oeil*.

Without doubt *Eyewitness to Jesus* will earn its authors much money. Jesus is big business in the publishing industry and sells well as a media-hype package. Easter Week 1996 in the U.S.A. saw three popular magazines feature cover stories with titles such as "In Search of Jesus" (*U.S. News & World Report*), "Rethinking the Resurrection" (*Newsweek*) and "The Search for Jesus" (*Time*). Only the last-named gave any attention to the Magdalen papyrus (p. 60) but all three confirmed Prof. Johnson's belief that "Commerce in the Christ has rarely been better" (*The Real Jesus* p. 1).

How to understand "better" is certainly not difficult. It is now possible for biblical scholars of very modest talents to earn huge supplemental incomes. One ivy-league professor received an advance of nearly half a million U.S. dollars for a book MS which several colleagues in the field found so lacking in substance and focus that they provided pages of critical comments and suggested changes. These were ignored by author and publisher, and the book appeared on schedule. The author's colleagues who had recommended substantial modifications were thanked in the acknowledgements as if they had provided the book's *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*. The volume has sold well, in part because the publisher arranged for the author to be profiled in popular journals and to be available for interviews on the "talk-show" circuit.

The author's sumptuous advance was publisher's money well spent and (of course) a sequel volume is now in progress. Since the trio of Easter-week cover stories (noted above) adorned all U.S.A. newsstands, two very different interpretations of "what Jesus was" have moved onto the "best-seller" lists in the U.S.A.: Reynolds Price's non-fiction *Three Gospels* (1996) and Paul Park's novel *The Gospel of Corax* (1996). The former is Price's somewhat odd re-translation of the Gospels of Mark and John, followed by a narrative

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recreation of a "Life of Jesus" which Reynolds styles (incorrectly) "An Apocryphal Gospel". The latter is a bizarre but imaginative account of Jesus' "hidden years" as a novice Buddhist monk, somewhat in the tradition of such fanciful works as Robert Graves' *King Jesus* (1956) or Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1958).

Neither Price nor Park is a biblical scholar or an ancient historian and neither makes any claims to such a background. They cannot and should not be judged by the same scale of values used for those who are trained to be, and make claims to be, biblical scholars. But Price, Park and others benefit from the antics of those who are members of what Prof. Johnson terms "the academy" (the scholarly establishment) and yet display in their attitudes and publications little concern for or attention to the standard rules of academic research. As this millennium's end approaches, the need to satisfy a perceived public interest in the arcane or revelatory or apocalyptic or anti-establishment aspects of early Christianity will most certainly lure many more scholars into the marginal but very lucrative market for "Jesus books". If obscure academics can make cover stories out of Christ, why shouldn't *any* writer of even mediocre talents do the same?

Some years ago I had dinner with Morton Smith during a dull conference at Brown University. In the course of a long and very wide-ranging discussion I asked him why it had taken him fifteen years (1958-1973) to publish his controversial *The Secret Gospel of Mark*. He looked at me very carefully and replied: "I didn't have any competition. There didn't seem to be any need to rush it into print." That is certainly not the case with *Eyewitness to Jesus*. Thiede and d'Ancona must have realized that the longer they waited between the initial article in the *London Times* and the publication of the book reviewed here, the less chance they had of capitalizing on the sensational aspects of their claims.

Henry Innes MacAdam
Princeton, NJ U.S.A.