



Acts of the Assassins

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Years later, the file is reopened when a second body appears. Gallio is called back by headquarters and ordered to track down everyone involved the first time round. The only problem is they keep dying, in ever more grotesque and violent ways. How can Gallio stay ahead of the game when the game keeps changing?

Acts of the Assassins is about one man's struggle to confront forces beyond his understanding. And about how lonely a turbulent world can be.

Acts of the Assassins Details

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From Reader Review Acts of the Assassins for online ebook

Ian Mond says

If you've read Richard Beard's 2012 novel, Lazarus is Dead, you probably won't be that surprised by the central conceit of his latest book, Acts of the Assassins. However, if you're like me and you're new to Beard's work then you'll hoot out loud when, a few pages into the novel, it becomes abundantly clear that the 'missing corpse' our protagonist Cassius Gallio has been tasked to find is the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What makes this reveal all the more brilliant and fascinating is that the novel is set in contemporary times; that the story of the death, the alleged resurrection and gospel of Christ is taking place in a world of iPhones, airplanes and TripAdvisor.

While Acts of the Assassins is set in an alternate history, this really isn't a speculative fiction novel. There is an expectation among genre fans that when an author diverges from known historical events she or he has considered the ramifications of that fork in the road. But other than retaining the Roman Empire as a world power, because what would Jesus be without Romans, nothing else has really changed; history, without Christianity, has essentially followed the same track. There are iPhones (branded as such), people drink Coca Cola and the airport in Israel is called Ben Gurion, implying that the country gained its independence in 1948. In other words, Beard has made no concession to what our contemporary life would be like if there'd been no such thing as Jesus two thousand years previously. Consequently, I'm sure there will be fans of speculative fiction who struggle to read a book that seems to care so little about the ripples of history.

Personally, I liked the fact that Beard doesn't get bogged down in the details. It means that Acts of the Assassins can be read as a revisionist critique of the influence Christianity had on Western culture. There are those who argue that without the civilizing influence of Christianity none of the technological and societal advances we enjoy would have occurred. Of course, in Beard's alternate history Judaism still exists (there's no mention of Islam) and coupled with the secularism of the Roman Empire, it could be argued that Christianity is surplus to requirements. However, that's not the message I get from the novel. While the book does, at times, poke fun at the Christian faith, especially the true believers who will travel to Spain to touch the bones of a Disciple, Beard's attention is more focused on Christianity as a political movement desiring to overturn the status quo. In fact the death of Jesus and the absconding of his body coupled with the Disciples claiming that he is the son of God and has risen to bring peace on Earth is viewed by the Romans as an act of terrorism. And suddenly, setting the novel in a world that's very similar to our own makes perfect sense. Replace the Romans with America, replace Jesus and his Disciples (who are depicted in the novel as a death cult) with ISIS and you can't help but view the Christ story in a different light. I'm not saying that Beard actively compares Jesus and the Disciples to "Radical Islam", but the Christian mission has always been to convert others to the word of Jesus and when you push that forward 2,000 years it becomes a direct threat to a Western way of life, no matter how peaceful the intent. As my Dad has always said, if the Messiah did pop up one day to take the Jews to Jerusalem, we'd probably tell him to piss off.

I haven't mentioned Cassius and yet his story, his character arc, is what gives the novel its backbone. When he can't find Jesus' corpse he is disgraced, forced to give up his role as a Speculator for the Complex Casework Unit (CCU) and become a grunt in the Army. A few years later and Cassius, frustrated that he was fooled by an insignificant cult, is called back to the CCU to investigate the death of one of the Disciples, James, who has been beheaded. When Thomas is stoned and Jude is shot with arrows, Cassius figures out that someone is deliberately killing the Disciples for reasons that go beyond their perceived unpopularity. Cassius believes if he can find Jesus (dead or alive), or if he can uncover why the disciples are being killed, he can be forgiven for originally losing Jesus' body and reclaim his role as a Speculator.

Cassius story, though, is more than just about him discovering the truth, it's also a spiritual journey as he begins to increasingly vacillate between whether Christ was / is a supernatural figure or just an arch manipulator who has used the Disciples as a means of increasing his power and promoting the faith. Yes, there's an element of cynicism about all this, and the reveal of who is behind the murder of the Disciples only adds to the cynicism. But Cassius also goes through a sense of awakening as he begins to feel empathy for the Disciples, genuinely concerned for their well-being (even if they seem to have a death wish). It means that Cassius is a sympathetic character without ever truly being likable.

Acts of the Assassins does have its flaws. The repetitive nature of the Disciples facing dangers, dying in grisly ways and Cassius and Claudia (his partner) being one step behind did wear me down a little. I was also annoyed that Beard fell back on the old cliché of Cassius eventually having sex with his female partner, after thinking naughty thoughts about her for a good chunk of the novel. I understand why it's there for plot related reason and it does highlight that Cassius isn't necessarily a nice guy, but it's one of the few predictable elements of the novel.

Those criticisms aside, Acts of The Assassins is a terrific novel. It's supplanting of the Jesus story in a contemporary and recognizable milieu compels the reader to view Jesus' sacrifice for our sins as a political and revolutionary act, rather than an act of faith and love.

Michelle Rudy says

Killing off the apostles. Each death more gruesome than the one before. It is a shaggy dog novel, probably not worth the effort to read or review.

James says

some blurb called this "gospel noir" and i almost laughed out loud... oh, the mindless attempts by the book-reviewing media to pigeonhole any/all books somehow... this was stellar... a alternative history of Jesus, and done near-impeccably so... interweaves the fates of the Jesus and his apostles and Paul as a sort of crime/detective/mystery/spy/thriller/ thing... i just loved it from the start... no grandstanding about faith of christianity or atheism or anything along those lines... just historical events reimagined into now, sort of... never any date given for when, which makes it work, as you never get too wrapped into trying to wonder about what else is going on in the fictive world created by the author... not sure why i enjoyed this so much, but i found it all amazingly well-crafted, gripping even, odd considering you "know" what happens, right? elements of the tale creep up on you, the continual wondering of how/why/when christianity spread, and who was responsible... all i can say is read this and try to figure out why no one else came up with the concept sooner... wonderful!

Audrey says

Funny, fresh. The story of the resurrection and the apostles, but told straight, with the Romans suspecting a terrorist insurgency/conspiracy. The apostles keep insisting that Jesus is everywhere. The Roman investigators respond, where, show us.

Say says

Didn't care about any of the characters at any point as they were completely two-dimensional. Plot was boring and felt drawn out. As for the universe, the less said the better about this contrivance which was no fun to read about and was entirely unbelievable. Left it for a few weeks after starting because I forgot I had been reading it.

Liz Barnsley says

Gosh this was COMPLETELY unexpected. Very good, excellent in fact, just to be clear, but not quite, perhaps, what you might be thinking from the blurb. You get what it says on the tin with a good deal of added extra. Plus its slightly weird which always appeals to me. A thriller? Yes. If you have to describe "Act of the Assassins" as anything that will do just fine.

Now I feel like I don't want to tell you any more about it because seriously it was extremely clever, changes the world as we know it and turns it on its head (Whilst spinning you around somewhat) and gives an entirely different perspective on, well, lots of things! Now you are probably intrigued - good because it is an intriguing and thought provoking read whilst at the same time being a really good thriller.

It is a completely mad read in some ways but terribly convincing and with some compelling themes - faith, cult following, amongst others - the characters are all strange yet wonderful and there are some interesting plot threads running throughout. It is intelligently drawn, a definite page turner in places, but again as I say it is one of those books that perhaps is best read cold. The non linear narrative works extremely well, giving it a unique edge and the mystery element is well imagined. In fact imaginative is probably the one word I would use to describe it as a whole.

I definitely recommend it for those of you looking for something a little different in their mystery thrillers.

Happy Reading Folks!

Allison says

This novel was ok. *Lazarus is Dead* was better. (In all honesty, if I hadn't read that novel first, the uniqueness of Beard's retelling Biblical history in such an imaginative way would probably have earned *Acts* at least one more star.)

Acts follows Gallio, a Speculator who was in charge of ensuring the death and burial of Jesus Christ, and whose career was ruined by the disappearance of Jesus' body from the tomb. He is called back to his post when the government agency that banished him worries that Jesus may actually be alive and needs his help tracking the man down, because he and his disciples pose a threat to the Roman empire.

The OCD side of my personality enjoyed the structure of this book, where each chapter leads toward the death of a disciple, but the creative writer in me found the format to be too formulaic. We never get to know

any of the disciples in any meaningful way, so when they die we aren't particularly saddened or horrified. Nor does Gallio, the book's protagonist, undergo much of a character arc. He starts out defeated, gains a little hope, ends up feeling defeated all over again, and in the end is vindicated but without any actual feeling of vindication. Suffice to say, it's not a very uplifting book.

What I did enjoy in *Acts* was the melding of modern-day technology and political issues (e.g., terrorism) with the historic retelling of the spread of Christianity post-resurrection . . . all without any religious leanings one way or the other. The crucifixion or burial of Jesus, for instance, aren't modernized (or romanticized) at all, and yet Gallio travels by airplane and carries a cell phone just as today's government agents would. Jesus and his disciples are suspected of being a cult and disrupting the Roman empire, which works both historically and in the modern retelling. This is a unique skill of Beard's that I cannot help but admire, no matter how disappointed I may be in the flatness of the characters or the treadmill nature of the narrative.

Cindy says

In this highly original, artful novel the Passion of Christ is a contemporary event. Special investigator Gallio, based in Jerusalem, is convinced that the death and resurrection of Jesus was a carefully planned hoax. Now, years after the event, the 12 disciples are being gruesomely killed one by one. Gallio needs these witnesses to solve the case and find Jesus- and, it becomes clear, to save himself as well. Beard has created a daring mix of police procedural, biblical retelling and alt-history that will stay with you long after you finish reading.

Stephanie says

It was a complete coincidence that I chose to read this very strange novel over the Easter weekend. I knew from the blurb that it was about a cult leader and his followers but had no idea who they were. I thought it was extremely clever, at times humorous but not the easiest to read.

I did feel dubious with what type of novel I might be reading with the chapter headings. I expected it to be quite graphic but with the exception of a couple the details were minimal.

It stretches the imagination, has you thinking what affect religion and belief has in our world when events from the Bible are brought into modern day.

This is the second in a very loose trilogy, I haven't read the first book, *Lazarus is Dead*, but didn't feel this had any negative reading of the book.

Thanks to the publisher for the copy sent to review.

Marjolein says

Read all my reviews on <http://urlphantomhive.booklikes.com>

After Blood of a Stone, this was my second Jesus-related book I incidentally read during the Easter weekend. Although I really hadn't guessed it from the blurb. I mean, would you?

"Gallio does counter-insurgency. But the theft of a body he's supposed to be guarding ruins his career. Bizarre rumours of the walking dead are swirling, there is panic in the air, and it's his job to straighten out the conspiracy. He blows the case.

Years later, the file is reopened when a second body appears. Gallio is called back by headquarters and ordered to track down everyone involved the first time round. The only problem is they keep dying, in ever more grotesque and violent ways. How can Gallio stay ahead of the game when the game keeps changing? *Acts of the Assassins* is about one man's struggle to confront forces beyond his understanding. And about how lonely a turbulent world can be."

I won't explain too much about it, because it is so weird I think you should find out most of it by yourself. But, being set in some kind of mash-up between the Roman Empire and modern times. Imagine gladiators, centurions and also mobile phones and aeroplanes. This book really deserves a place between the weirdest books (of at least 2015; possibly of all time) and I've been reading some weird book lately.

However, I did really enjoy it. It read very fast and was a decent detective story and besides I also thought it was quite funny from time to time. The terrible arrangement made by his organization forces to Gallio to always fly with a stop in Schiphol (the Netherlands; possibly made a deal with a Dutch airline) made me smile. Schadenfreude of course, especially since most flights are between places in the Middle East, but I thought it was a nice twist.

If you're ready to set everything you know about Roman times aside and would like to read about it as if it were modern times (It does take some imagination, especially in the beginning), then I think this is a very good book for you. It's definitely something completely different from what I (and I think most people) usually read.

Thanks to the publisher and Netgalley for providing me with a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review!

Suzanne says

This was a compelling read; I was hooked within two pages. Superficially it's a (very engaging) police procedural set in a Roman Empire brought into the 21st century, complete with the internet, airport lounges and lock-up garages. Added to that, there's a fantsy element: many of the key events bleed through time, happening almost simultaneously in the 1st and 21st centuries, both real-time and with effects reverberating 2000 years later.

The real story, though, offers a much deeper reflection on the nature of terrorism and religion, leadership and loyalty. It's this that stayed with me well after finishing the book. You won't look at early Christian history quite the same again.

Kate says

What a strange book...

Jeannette Nikolova says

Read on the WondrousBooks blog.

Romulus, the founder of Rome, enters an underground room in the Forum. He is old, his pulse weak, his service to the city is complete. His senators in their purple-striped togas follow him into the room, which has no windows and only one door. What follows is a classic sealed room mystery: Romulus is never seen again.

What happened to Romulus? Did he ascend? Or is it that the simplest explanation is the right one:

The senators had closed the door and stabbed old Romulus in silence, alerting none of the Forum's hyper-alert slaves. Then they knelt to dissect the body. Each senator concealed a small section of flesh or bone beneath his toga, and they carried Romulus away from the sealed room in pieces. The cuts of meat they dispersed through the city, flushed into cisterns or tossed to scavenging dogs. No trace of Romulus was ever found.

I'm honestly surprised that **Acts of the Assassins** has not already gathered more readers. I checked the Goodreads page and only two people have rated it so far, and a couple are currently reading it. Considering that I got the book through NetGalley and one needs to express their desire to read a book, it may be that not many have paid attention to this particular book.

They are wrong.

Acts of the Assassins is an unbelievable book, completely mind-blowing in its setting and originality. It's absolutely brilliant and completely mad.

Imagine that the New Testament never happened, that you did not believe in Jesus. Imagine that you turned on the TV today and heard about yet another mad cult, following a man, who the media makes out to be a complete lunatic. Another Charles Manson, perhaps? On the TV they say that in Jerusalem a probable terrorist cell has started working. They killed a man named Lazarus and later claimed that he has been resurrected. Then the cult's leader, a man known as Jesus, was publicly executed by the state. Only it seems he didn't stay dead either. There have been sightings of him all over the Empire. Notify the authorities if you have any information.

This book offers a very ambiguous perspective of religion as we know it and the present as it is. The Roman empire still exists in an era of computers, tracers, cell phones and airplanes. A Speculator, a cop, is sent to look for the body of a cult leader named Jesus. Only he fails. Years later he is brought back to action, as members of the cult are being killed off.

Now that you've taken a look in the premises of the book, answer to yourself, how would you feel if this happened today? I can tell you: you'd be annoyed that yet another psycho is filling the world with propaganda and religious insanity. See, it's so much different looking from a modern perspective at these Biblical events.

The narrative of the book is as original as its setting: it's highly nonlinear, in one chapter we have - the events around Jude, the ones after Thomas, after Jude, after Thomas, and then the ones surrounding Paul, which take place before Thomas. At certain points it's hard to keep up, it even seems like the author is giving out spoilers. But it's rewarding, at least as far as I'm concerned.

A book like this will probably be placed among the likes of "The Da Vinci Code", but I don't think that's where it belongs. It's all that and much more. It has a touch of mystery and a lot of thriller in it, but overall, this is a book about **obsession**, faith, religion. Despite the fact that many other themes were much more prominent, I think that it is exactly **obsession** that is the driving force of **Acts of the Assassins**. Each and every character has their own obsession that they project on the world around them and which clouds their judgement and makes them move, however the direction. There is action and police work and a bit of a chase too, but the core is the book's on philosophy and the moral dilemmas that the characters are faced with. There is no sugar-coating it, both the story and the language are blunt and honest and a little bit brutal, but brutality is definitely not the point of it, it's just an instrument.

Of course, I had some questions regarding the world in the book, but I think that's to be expected when one is faced with a new, made-up universe.

1. If Jesus is not part of traditional religion, which I gather is Old Testament Christianity, and He was born in a completely normal family, how is it that the idea of "immaculate conception" exists at all. It was very pointedly mentioned during the visit in the museum when the author talks about Salvador Dali's "Immaculate

conception" painting.

2. How did religion develop?

3. How did the Empire survive, considering that emperor Constantine would have been blown to dust if he hadn't allied forces with the Christians to make for a stronger army? If there were no post-Jesus Christians in the Roman empire, how would it have been possible for him to win the war that they won for him?

4. How did technology manage to get developed in a world which is as barbaric and underdeveloped as the one described, technology aside. Public executions and gladiators and torture are still a thing, and we are witnesses even today to the fact that savages who give themselves over to such barbarity, are not able to focus themselves on further development of the world and pursuits of the mind.

5. How is it that America was never found? Proof to that is the fact that it's stated on multiple occasions that Scotland is at the end of the world.

My questions, however, do not lessen my love for this book. It's an amazing piece of original thinking which provoked much thought for me. I highly recommend this to anyone and everyone.

James says

This book surprised me. The blurb accompanying it led me to believe that I was about to read some form of spy thriller, but instead it turned out to be a Biblical thriller updated to the current day. This is no bad thing and I found the setting and the alternate universe the author created to be quite compelling.

The novel basically imagines an alternate world where the Roman Empire has lasted until the current time. It imagines what would have happened if Jesus and his disciples were active in the present day. All the characters are here: Judas, Pontius Pilate, etc. The book imagines how a Roman Empire, with all the benefits of modern technology, might have attempted to quash the emerging Jesus cult.

The protagonist, Gallio, is a Counter Terror operative tasked with doing just that. The early part of the book tells in flashback of how he corrupts Judas and eventually is involved in arranging Jesus's crucifixion. But when Jesus's body disappears and the apostles' talk of the resurrection, things go bad for him. He is discredited, banished to far-flung outposts of the empire. Finally, years later, he's called back and tasked with finding out what happened to Jesus.

The remainder of the novel follows Gallio around as he hunts down apostles and interrogates them, only to

find many murdered in horrific ways before he gets to them. The book is best in how it examines the disconnect between Gallio and the apostles he meets, he takes them literally when they say that Jesus is here, Jesus is everywhere, Jesus knows who you are, when it seems apparent to the reader that they are merely preaching the Gospel. Similarly, the book examines the theory that some scholars have that the current form Christianity took has much more to do with Paul than Jesus, that Paul transformed what was perhaps a revolutionary creed into a much more passive and accommodating one. According to this school of thought, this meant that Christianity no longer posed a threat to the state and could indeed become the official faith.

Paul appears in the novel as an oily figure, sly and conspiratorial. But is he the state agent Gallio finally concludes him to be, or a triple agent actually fooling the authorities and doing Jesus's bidding? This here brings me to the problem I had with the book. The author clearly doesn't want to make a definitive statement either way on any of the major themes in the book. Who is killing the disciples? Is it all part of Jesus's plan? Is it Paul? Is it Gallio's employers? Similarly, is Jesus a revolutionary planning terror outrages? Did he really die on the cross? Was his body spirited away somehow or did he really rise from the dead?

I understand this reluctance, the author obviously thought it best to keep the mystery of the Bible, no to mention the fact that answering these questions might alienate a section of his potential audience: come down on the side of Jesus as the Son of God and you alienate atheists; say that Jesus was conman and you alienate Christians. But even so, I found it incredibly frustrating and as I got near the end and realised that no answers would be forthcoming I did find myself feeling a little cheated.

That said, this is an interesting take on the Bible story and one that I would recommend to anyone, regardless of the their faith or none.

I would give this book 4 out of 5 stars

Mandy says

An interesting idea but I could not get into the book. The "jokes" are simply nods and references to Scripture; they felt expected. I like a main character I can get behind and root for but I never could relate to Gallio. All of the other characters seemed flat. Not my cup of tea.

Rick O'Shea says

Acts Of The Assassins is a genuinely wonderful stand-out thriller that rattles along with clever parallels being drawn about the attempted influence of western powers in the same part of the world 21st century.

Smart, flash, fun, very impressive.

Full review, as always, is here - <http://www.rickoshea.ie/?p=10738>

E says

I'm going to go ahead and write some spoilers, so I'm alerting you now (USAGE NOTE: I've noticed people confusing the terms 'spoiler' and 'spoiler alert.' A spoiler is a revelation of some part of a plot or mystery, usually involving a novel or film; a spoiler alert is a warning to your audience that you're about to provide said spoiler, so cover your ears or eyes if you don't want to hear or see the revelation. I've seen people using the latter term when they mean the former, and it's driving me crazy. Please stop! END USAGE NOTE)

This novel is set in a modern-day ancient world. Wait, what? There are airplanes, e-mail, cell phones, etc. There are also donkeys, apostles, the Roman Empire, and barbarians at the gates. It's an interesting conceit, but I don't think Beard quite pulls it off. The protagonist is a detective investigating the "disappearance" of Jesus Christ. He suspects an apostolic conspiracy, but the apostles keep dying off (in the ways traditionally believed: Simon sawed in half, James beheaded, Peter crucified upside-down, etc.). So the protagonist is trying to chase down the story before they die off (insert lame backstory here: divorce, problems with superiors, up and down career, sleeping with fellow detective, etc.). Eventually it turns out that the apostle Paul is a big jerk who is actually a double agent, working for the state and killing off the other apostles.

Unimpressed? Yeah, me too. Slightly queasy? Yeah, me too. Worth reading? No.

Sharon says

Not my kind of book at all, fans of "I Am Pilgrim" may enjoy. A very clever idea, using the characters of Jesus and his disciples in a modern setting where Jesus is a missing person and someone is bumping the disciples off in a gruesome fashion. Unfortunately a lot of it went over my head and I found the main character dull. Read for Book Club.

Paul Fulcher says

Book 4 from the Goldsmiths shortlist, and my favourite so far. A book that revealed more subtlety as it progressed.

The idea of a novel re-imagining the Gospel story isn't particularly original. Indeed Richard Beard himself did it in his previous novel, *Lazarus is Dead* focusing eponymous friend of Jesus (albeit in Beard's re-telling their relationship was more troubled), and this book is the second part of a loose trilogy. [Beard has suggested his third novel in the series will focus on John, set in future-day America]

Here Beard concentrates on the resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent acts of the apostles. He presents the novel as a crime story which starts, obviously, with a missing body but rapidly becomes a murder mystery. The victims are clear from the table of contents before the novel even starts: the 12 original disciples and their deaths, in each chapter title, are linked traditional, rather than biblical (except for Judas and James), martyrdom stories for each. E.g. "III JUDE shot with arrows", and with John, the only one popularly believed to have survived to a long life, the focus of the final chapter called simply "XII JOHN". Indeed Beard seems to have used these traditions as a form of Oulipan constraint on the plot of the novel.

And the chief suspects - none other than Jesus himself, if he really didn't die.

The chief investigator is Cassius Gallo, official title "Speculator", representative of the occupying Roman forces and answerable to the Complex Casework Unit. In a nod to Beard's previous book, he is already under pressure "after the embarrassment of what happened with Lazarus. He still doesn't understand how they did that."

As this suggests, Beard's aim isn't it seems, unlike many other novelists, to give us any radically different perspective on Jesus or his own theological views. Indeed he rather seems to use the topic matter for jokes as much as anything: the first lead on the missing body is "a sighting on the Emmaus road"; "Thomas has privileged information about the health status of Jesus in the period after the crucifixion"; when interrogating the first suspect (and subsequently the first victim) Judas, Cassius Gallio prompts "a local source tells me the way you betrayed him was foretold.>"; his investigations reveal that none of the city's gardeners "remembers speaking to a distressed middle-aged lady on the day in question at or near the crime scene."; on Stephen's stoning "an Israeli agent called Saul set up the hit to showcase his talents". It's all a little Life of Brian.

The last example does speak to the one theological topic that the book does tackle and which becomes integral to the plot as it develops. Namely the role of Paul (formerly Saul) and the suggested difference between the version of Christianity from his epistles vs. that one would glean from the gospels alone.

He is, in this novel, the other chief suspect, a rogue former Israeli agent but now a double - or triple? - agent, Rome's "client apostle, because his version of the faith suited the requirements of an advanced nation state. Paul believed in marriage and social stability and paying taxes, solid civilised virtues...Instead of miracles he opts for conference theology with regular breaks from spiritual engagement for complimentary light refreshments...The disciples of Jesus inconvenience him. They're his competition, so the quieter the disciples the stronger the voice of Paul, and one day Jesus will be whoever and whatever Paul decides he is in his letters."

One key plot element does seem to depend on a misreading by Beard of scripture - the identity of the beloved disciple from John 21:20-22 who may remain alive until Jesus returns. Except from the bible passage we know who it isn't i.e. Peter.

The other non-standard part of Beard's novel is the "quantum fiction" approach - a term I rather dislike as the technique both pre-dates quantum physics and is not directly related to it, but one the author himself has used in interviews. In his own words

"The novel is set concurrently now and in the time of the disciples. The effect is of a historical novel set in the present – the former disciples of Jesus are working folk from Lake Galilee, but in Jerusalem they can be bundled into police cars or photographed with a telephoto lens. One of the more freakish conclusions of quantum physics is that the exact location of a particle can never be measured, and my characters exist in two different eras at once. This is partly a response to the idea of 'eternal'. If the Jesus story is eternal then it happened then but is also happening now.

<http://www.vintage-books.co.uk/blog/a...>

As this suggests, Beard sets his novel in an odd hybrid of the 1st Century and the 21st "in Jerusalem past and present coexist. Possibly the future too.". Again this is clear from the very opening pages when "A boy runs down an alley, a tray of loaves on his head. He dodges a rasping scooter ... Passover in Jerusalem smells like Heaven. And of burned meat from the temple. And the haze of two-stroke.". Similarly, all the images of Jesus that the investigators have to go on are "sculptures and a great many paintings, also the imprint on the shrouds", but when the investigators make a potential sighting, they can send photos via their smartphones to HQ where computers can then scan them against the pictures for a match, and send over the relevant

information from Wikipedia.

Again at first this seems more for comic effect. But, as the novel progresses Beard makes the effect more interesting with past and present starting to blur. Philip dies in his own Martyrium in Pamukkale, (which was in reality constructed in the 5th Century), with pre-existing information boards explaining his death. And the Apostle Andrew follows Gallio from the UK, by a tracking device planted on his mobile phone, to a seemingly randomly chosen Greek holiday resort Patras. They meet in the Orthodox Agios Andreas Basilica, beneath "an oversized icon of Andrew the disciple of Jesus on cobalt and gold. Andrew is roped to an x-shaped cross."

And Beard uses his device to explore the topic of free will vs. omnipotence and predestination. Gallio increasingly realises that the unfolding events seem pre-destined; "everything he made happen corresponded to preparations Jesus and his disciples had made in advance". "The future is not shaped in advance," Gallio thinks, "but can be changed by willed human action. This is a core principle of civilisation as Gallio has been taught to defend it." - but the evidence is otherwise.

Beard himself is not a believer, and initially my concern was that he was mining the Gospel story for fun. But the novel does explore some important issues, sympathetically, and the closing pages of the novel: the final confrontations between Gallio, the apostle John and Paul, are genuinely moving.

Keith Rosson says

Really cool and weird spin on a thriller. Slow-burn of a literary detective story, made all the more surreal due to the Biblical arc. Only real complaint is that I felt like we were meant to keep track of each Apostle's relevance in the story but the majority of them were interchangeable and lacked distinction - though on some level, that seemed intentional too. Anyway, cool, weird, dark novel. Beard can write like a beast.
