

The fewer the clues, the more scholars enjoy the role of detective

Brother in the shade

James the Brother of Jesus

by Robert Eisenman
1,074pp, Faber, £25

Paul: The Mind of the Apostle

by A N Wilson
273pp, Sinclair-Stevenson, £17.99

Robert Morgan

More is known about early Christianity than the origins of other world religions. Yet much remains obscure and is surely destined to remain so. The quality of some of the sources makes the gaps all the more frustrating. And there are other complications. The subject matter is precious to some of the investigators and hateful to others, and in any case elusive. The puzzling mixture of myth, history and legend, in writings which do not claim to be disinterested, has been treated by some with credulity and by others with inordinate suspicion. Claims to objectivity have been a mask for both religious apologetics and anti-religious polemics.

All that amounts to a health-warning, but will not reduce the addiction. The fascination of the subject creates a lucrative market in books on Jesus and Paul, and a growing interest in the less seminal characters. A fine example of the latter is Robert Eisenman's 1,100-page book on the shadowy figure of James, the brother of Jesus.

Whether "brother" means half-brother, or cousin — or what it says, as Eisenman insists — is disputed, but this devout Jew headed the Jerusalem church at least from the 40s to his death in 62, shortly before the disastrous war with Rome. He was apparently a leading figure in the dangerous politics of his day and his illegal execution at the instigation of the puppet High Priest Ananus is reported by the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus.

Professor Eisenman's attempt to do justice to a major figure who has been half-written out of the surviving records is admirable, but must rely on scraps and hints and echoes in unexpected places. Historical exploration will often have to be guesswork, and phrases like "the real Jesus" or (as subtitle) "the true history of early Christianity" are better avoided. But the quest is worthwhile, if only to remind us to make room in our mental pictures for the blank areas of our ignorance.

Eisenman is an expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and one partly responsible for their full publication (at long last). His hunch is that

these contain clues to the now largely lost history of Palestinian Christianity. This was aggressively anti-Roman and contemptuous of parties seeking accommodation with the oppressor, including Paul. His further hunch is far less likely unless the surviving evidence is hopelessly skewed: if James was like that, then so was Jesus.

Later apocryphal literature and traditions about James from 2nd and 3rd-century church writers are sifted. Their scattered hints are said to be more reliable than the deliberate rewritings and obfuscation of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Many of Eisenman's suggestions depend on decoding the literary transformations, parodies, erasures, reversals and confusions in our existing sources, especially where individuals' names are concerned. Most historians will want more evidence than exists before entertaining such ideas. Yet the theory should not be too easily dismissed.

An enviable knowledge of what might be important evidence, a powerful historical imagination and gift for making combinations, and an approach quite different from most biblical scholarship offer a stimulus that outweighs the eccentric judgments. This passionate quest for the historical James refutes Christian origins and can be enjoyed as a thrilling essay in historical detection.

A N Wilson's more popular work on Paul also deserves to be widely read. It is elegantly written and relies only on the familiar New Testament sources, good background information on the ancient world, and a lively imagination. The outline provided in the Acts of the Apostles provides a frame but is used critically. Fictional elements are identified in terms which much recent scholarship would confirm. Paul's epistles are drawn on to convey a sense of the apostle's religion, not to reconstruct or interpret his theology. But despite some attractive vignettes providing historical context, this remains an intelligent modern reader's impressions, not a contribution to the scientific study of religion. And a more solemn work would not call the apostle a "spiritual Mr Toad". A certain ambivalence about religion and dislike of organised religion surface on occasion but are compatible with an apparently sincere appreciation of Paul's greatness. A few mistakes are minor blemishes on a lively, entertaining and informative book.

