

TLC Showcase

NICHOLAS GRAHAM

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Introduction to *The Judas Case*

Yehuda from Kerioth was the most able undercover agent that the Temple guard ever produced. After eighteen months of meticulous preparation infiltrating the entourage of a Galilean holy man and would-be king of Israel, Yeshua from Nazareth, he came to Jerusalem at Passover and pulled off his greatest coup. Two days later he was dead. What went wrong?

Retired spymaster Solomon Eliades is called back from his vineyard to investigate the death of his protegee, and finds that secrets from his own past - and a search for an inconveniently missing body - put him and his family in danger.

I'd wanted to write fiction about the historical background to the gospels (and not from the perspective of faith) for a very long time. There is no set of events in history that presents a bigger challenge to the historical novelist than the life of Jesus. The very little that's known is completely overlaid with after-the-fact assumption and interpretation. By re-casting the story as detective fiction, and focusing the narrative upon Judas, I wanted to peel back the layers and tell a story that's joltingly vivid and experienced without benefit of hindsight. And of course a detective cannot rely on supernatural intervention to reveal the truth.

I was still working on the first draft when a friend suggested entering an extract to the Northern Writers Awards run by New Writing North in 2016. I was absolutely thrilled to win one of the New Fiction Bursaries, sponsored by The Literary Consultancy. Aki was enthusiastic about the project and I sent in a substantial part of the novel for the 'free read'. Aki suggested Ashley Stokes as the reader, and I asked him to consider some specific questions about genre, and the depiction of female characters in a society that constrained women's social and public roles. Ashley's review was invaluable – his advice ensured I re-focused Solmon's voice and behaviour with a finer awareness of reader expectations and that I avoided anachronism. And he went well beyond the brief I'd suggested, giving me extremely helpful insights into narrative rhythm and the art of the cliff-hanger.

The Literary Consultancy's advice was a crucial stage of development – it provided the spur for a pervasive rewriting and improvement that made *The Judas Case* a far stronger proposition. I'm delighted that it set me on the road to publication.

Extract from *The Judas Case* by Nicholas Graham

The red clay of Judea hardly seems made of earth and water. It is an element entirely to itself. Beyond Jerusalem's southern walls the fields of the potters were a sucking, glutinous morass. We left our horses at the end of the road and began to struggle towards the kilns. My assistant had barely spoken during the journey, either to his horse or to me. His name was Saul. *Sha'ul. The prayed-for child.* Perhaps the child of aged parents. Prayed-for, to be a comfort to them. Not prayed for by me. When he had condescended to speak to me at all it had been in the faultless Hebrew of piety.

"And did you study in Athens?" I asked him in Greek. He grunted and looked away. His bruised face was hurt and resentful.

One rule of interrogation, even the friendly sort: you wait until your informant is ready to tell you whatever truth is burdening his soul. All you need do is prepare the circumstances, and wait. Whatever it was that my assistant wanted to tell me about himself I would find out when he was ready.

Above us the kilns glowed deep against the darkness of the valley sides. Mud clung to my boots, every step adding a fresh layer. The last heave up to the charcoal stacks was a mimed toil, each movement more exaggerated than the last. I looked back. Saul was struggling twenty paces behind, a permanent scowl part agony, part outrage, all indignity, twisted across his face. I had draped a white shroud from the Temple stores around his neck and he was very obviously terrified of polluting it.

"Come on," I shouted in Greek. He glanced up at me, and slipped, one knee smeared in the morass. Then I turned back to the kilns and looked upon the scene of death. Beyond the stacks of charcoal was a single shuttle-tree. A body hung from the third branch. The rope was short. The man's feet were barely clear of the ground. Pink blossoms, battered and sodden by the days of rain, were smeared around him. I held back: the first impression of the scene of a crime can yield clues in the moments before your mind re-arranges what it sees for the first time into familiarity. The body turned slowly in the damp wind. The morass beneath the tree was darker than

the mud through which I had struggled. I wiped my eyes and looked again. Our Yehuda was dead. He had gone down to Sheol.

The men posted to guard the body were slouched by the last kiln. Their presence was a rather extravagant precaution, no-one would willingly approach that tree. They shuffled forwards, looking foolishly under-employed, and I thanked them for their vigilance.

"Has anyone approached the body?"

No. Nobody had. The potters had kept their distance too.

"And the body is just as you found it?"

"Yes, master," the taller of the two finally spoke.

"May we be relieved, master?" The smaller one asked.

"No." They both visibly drooped. "You've done well to stay at your posts, both of you. I'm grateful for your service. You'll be commended to Lord Philo. But we will need your assistance in removing the body."

They glanced at each other, appalled by the idea. Old, simple men for whom the prospect of defilement by touching the dead was a humiliation and a horror.

"I'm sorry," I added. "But we must. Now, take me to the man who first found him."

Down the slope, Saul still laboured with the shroud he was carrying around his shoulders.

"Come on," I shouted.

The man who had found our Yehuda was caked in clay slip, his rough garments clattered across his skin. Hands, arms, neck and face were covered in the cracked

and dried substance of his trade. His hair was singed, the parts of his face that were bare were blasted red with the heat of the kilns and his fingers were blistered into deformity. Beneath all this, he was a boy. Perhaps as old as fourteen. His eyes watered red, and he stared at me in fear.

"What you want then?"

"I'm looking for the man who found the body of my friend. I want to thank him for his trouble."

With the maximum fuss that was reasonable, I took the purse from the cord at my waist and began to extract a single gold coin. I had his attention.

"I want to know was he like that when you found him?"

"Course he was. You don't think I'd touch a thing like that do you?"

"Of course not."

"When are you taking it away then? I suppose that you're going to?" He glanced over my shoulder. "Your friend's having some trouble isn't he?"

I looked back. Saul was at the top of the slope, gripping his thighs with both hands and pulling each time he raised his foot.

"Don't worry. We'll take it away. When did you find it?"

"When I got here, of course."

"And when was that?" He looked at me and his eyes distrusted me again. I held up the coin and offered it to him.

"Early," he said. "I got here early. I can't let the kilns cool down and break up, can I, just because of some extra Shabbat the priests decide we've got to have."

"How early?"

"Early enough," he said, and his eyes were looking over my shoulder at Saul.

"Yesterday?"

"Nah. I was early, but I wouldn't do that, would I?"

"What?"

"Break the laws of Shabbat? Not me, boss." He took the coin. "Tell your friend that."

The sound of squelching mud behind me announced the arrival of my assistant. He was standing there, mud up to his thighs. He unwound the shroud, the boy saw his Temple guard tunic and distrust returned.

"He means you no harm. You're a good boy, I can tell. I'm sure you've not broken Shabbat." I showed him the purse. "We'll talk again, yes?"

"Yeah. Whenever." He turned back to his kiln.

"What's your name, friend?"

"Levi."

"Thank you, Levi. Come on." I grasped Saul by the arm. "Cover up your tunic. You're frightening people. We've got work to do. Let's examine the body, shall we?"

"Must I allow myself to be defiled?"

Yes, I thought to myself, you must. This is the Service. What did you expect?

"You have a tablet? And a stylus?"

"Of course."

"Then use them. Take down everything I say. Word for word, while I examine the body. That will be helpful."

I walked up to the tree. Fifteen years and the violence of death had changed his appearance, but it was him, of that I had no doubt. The same red hair, now streaked grey at the sides. The same freckles, still visible beneath the dried blood that caked his face. But his eyes were a mess where the birds had been at them and his cheeks, chin, neck and ears were swollen with black blood down to the line where the rope cut into his skin. It was the engorged face of a man who had suffocated under his own weight. A vile way to die; no-one who understood that would have chosen it. And he had understood about death. Flies darted across his face. I looked up at him, bloody, beaten, encrusted, choked. Then the body turned in the wind and swung away from us, and I wept. When I mastered myself, I spoke in Greek.

"Are you ready?"

Saul scowled. I began. "First day of the week. 17 Nisan. Year 46 of the Temple. My name is Solomon Eliades, temporarily attached to the Service of the Temple Guard in Jerusalem and commanded to investigate these matters. These are my true words, describing what I see and hear. The body is hanging from a tree in the fields of the pottery workers about a Shabbat's journey beyond the city walls. The tree is a common shuttle tree and stands one hundred paces from the roadside to the south. I hereby identify the body as that of Yehuda from Kerioth, also an officer of the Service."

Silence. I looked round. The stylus and tablet had dropped from my assistant's hands and were lying in the mud. Saul was staring in appalled fascination at Yehuda's face. The body, turning on its rope as I had been speaking, was facing him. Close observation, the first element of any investigation.

"Look, Saul," I said gently. "You'll need to get used to this."

"It's really him, isn't it?" he said, half in a whisper, half in horror. "Yehuda, from Kerioth. He helped us arrest that Galilean magician."

He picked up his stylus and the tablet, from which he began to wipe the mud with fastidious care.

"Philo said you were there. What happened?"

"What did he tell you?"

"He said it was a difficult operation."

Saul looked away from the body and stared down.

"You can tell me," I said. But I was too soon. He chose silence.

"Very well. Let us begin."

About the Writer

Nicholas Graham grew up in West Cumbria, spent his youth among the mountains of the Lake District and has worked for an international airline, a long-standing mutual organisation, various governments and several leading universities. He was a member of the Sidney Sussex College Cambridge team that won BBC2's University Challenge – Reunited series. After living for many years in the south of England he returned to Cumbria with the aim of writing fiction. He lives with his partner in a remote coastal village close to a decommissioned nuclear power station, a location he regards as being at the heart of the realities of the age.



Nicholas is a graduate of the Creative Writing Programme at Manchester Metropolitan University where he studied under Nicholas Royle and Andrew Biswell, and won the 2012 Michael Schmidt Prize. An early draft of *The Judas Case* won a Northern Writers Awards New Fiction Bursary in 2016. *The Judas Case* will be published by The Book Guild in August 2022. Follow him on Twitter @ThatNickGraham and via www.thejudascase.com.