

Books of The Times

Ingenious Plot Makes Implausible Tale

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

THE Q DOCUMENT. By James Hall Roberts.
289 pages. Morrow, \$4.75.

WHEN the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls became known a few years ago many people were vaguely disappointed. All right, they thought, so it's a contribution to scholarship.

But think how much more dramatic it would be, how truly exciting, if the scrolls had included an incontestably authentic document containing hitherto unknown information about Jesus; perhaps something written by one of the disciples, or even by Jesus himself. Such a reaction, it seems probable to me, was the inspiration of James Hall Roberts' novel, "The Q Document." If the Dead Sea scrolls were insufficiently exciting, Mr. Roberts could imagine documents that would be. Suppose ancient papyrus documents turned up, written by St. Paul, St. Luke and Jesus which showed Jesus as "as political madman with a messianic complex," neither divine nor even good.

That would be sensational enough to cause any amount of controversy and international intrigue; and sensational enough, too, to provide the plot gimmick of a popular novel.

Author Is Ingenious

James Hall Roberts is the pseudonym of an author who has written other novels and some television scripts. He lives in California and (judging by the local color in "The Q Document") once lived in Japan. He is ingenious in contriving an intricate plot. He did enough research so that he could write about early Christian documents, paleography and carbon-dating of papyrus manuscripts with glib confidence. His idea ought to be a good one for a melodramatic novel seasoned with a dash of religious feeling. Alas, it hasn't worked out that way.

"The Q Document" is sleek, mechanical and wildly implausible. In its present form it is not very interesting and not very entertaining. Dramatized on TV, it might be much better.

This is the story of an unhappy historian spiritually ill because of tragedies in his private life; of an unhappy woman journalist running out of money and out of talent because of heavy drinking; and of a villainous plump, brothel-keeper and dealer in stolen and forged documents.

Tricky Plot

It is laid in Japan, perhaps because Mr. Roberts thought his villain would be able to carry on his nefarious activities there more comfortably than elsewhere.

The plot concerns the historian's labors to translate and authenticate five ancient docu-

ments, the villain's efforts to force an eleven-year-old girl into a life of prostitution; and the problem of the documents. If they were authentic the Red Chinese government would like to buy them and use them to discredit Christianity.

Authentic or not, a lovable Catholic priest didn't know what to do about the documents and was forced to appeal to the Vatican for advice. And what should the historian do to satisfy his scholarly conscience and his vestigial religious convictions? Whatever he did, he had to save the child.

Mr. Roberts knows how to keep his narrative in motion. His material on papyri and how to tell whether they are forged is moderately interesting. But his characters are stiff and dull. They can be moved like chess pieces to advance the plot. But that's not enough. It is impossible to care about them, or to believe in them.

The villain's oily menace would be more appropriate in a movie serial of the early 1920s than in a novel of the 1960. The hero's psychological problems seem like fashionable decoration rather than the stuff of genuine grief. The woman journalist seems to be present only because a melodramatic novel ought to have a heroine and a love interest in order to attract women readers.