

From *The Messiah Matrix*

By Kenneth John Atchity

Front matter and chapter 1

Kenneth John Atchity was professor of literature and classics at Occidental College in Los Angeles 1970-87, and served as Fulbright Professor to the University of Bologna. Aside from his novels, his academic career saw the publication of dozens of books, papers, lectures, and scholarly articles on Greek, Roman, and Italian literature.

In a second career he represented writers of both fiction and non-fiction, accounting for numerous bestsellers and movies he produced for both television and big screen. He has drawn on his expert knowledge of Christian history and his classical training to write *The Messiah Matrix*.

Also by Kenneth Atchity:

Eterne in Mutabilitie: The Unity of the Faerie Queene

Homer's Iliad: The Shield of Memory

Homer: Critical Essays

A Writer's Time

Seven Ways to Die

The Renaissance Reader

The Classical Greek Reader

The Classical Roman Reader

*** with William Diehl**

Praise for *The Messiah Matrix*:

At the deepest level, a sympathetic, fair-minded rational re-examination of "the greatest story ever told." You may applaud, dispute, chortle, weep, but you will think about this book long after the final page.--Benedict and Nancy Freedman, authors of *Mrs. Mike*, *Sappho: The Tenth Muse*, *The Immortals*

This entertaining and thought-provoking thriller explores the historical origins of Christianity, challenging the most fundamental assumptions of the Church. Beware ye of little faith--the final denouement will blow you away...--David Angsten, author of *Dark Gold* and *Night of the Furies*

Ken Atchity's *Messiah Matrix* will challenge your beliefs and cause you to question centuries-old stories of the origins of Christianity, but most of all it will take you on a thrilling adventure as Ryan and Emily try to stay alive while they uncover long-hidden secrets of the Catholic Church. A book not to be put down until you regretfully turn the last page.--Larry D. Thompson, author *So Help Me God*, *The Trial*, and *Dead Peasants*

In a thriller that rivals anything Dan Brown ever wrote, *The Messiah Matrix* threatens to take all your beliefs and toss them into the wind.--Cheryl's Book Nook

The Messiah Matrix ... is, without question, one of the most intriguing novels I've ever read. Not only is the story brilliantly told, expertly written and the characters vividly developed, but the scholarship needed and employed to write this fascinating work boggles the mind. The unexpected ending of the novel left me inspired, speechless and embracing "faith" in a beautiful, universal way I never expected.--Warren Woodruff, author *Dr. Fuddle and the Gold Baton*

A unique combination of carefully researched material and breathless adventure story.--Book, Bones & Buffy
Action-packed, historically laced, and masterfully detailed page-turner. (Watch out for paper cuts!--You'll be turning the pages quickly. It's that good!) --Blogcritics

Fast-paced, thought-provoking, sexy, suspenseful... these are but a few expressions that describe *The Messiah Matrix*...

Atchity unified every aspect of great writing in equal measure creating a novel for historians, adventure seekers, lovers of romance and those who are simply in the market for a good, old-fashioned, kick-ass read. This book has got it all...
--Lisa Cerasoli, author *As Nora Jo Fades Away*

The Messiah Matrix is so well written and authentically documented that when the reading is done one cannot easily separate that which may be a frightening truth about a falsity perpetrated by a powerful group within the Catholic Church from a well written fiction thriller plucked from Mr. Atchity's fertile imagination... -Milton Lyles, author of *The Cruellest Lie* and *The Candle Seller*

...Although the novel is set in present day Rome, Vatican City and Israel, the author cleverly and elegantly sweeps the reader back to the time of the Emperor Augustus and the far reaches of the Roman Empire... Atchity, a former professor of world literature has published books on the Classics and on the art and craft of writing...besides being a scholar and a genius, he is also a gifted story-teller.

The Messiah Matrix will undoubtedly become as talked about and as controversial as *The Da Vinci Code*--perhaps even more so.--Terry Stanfill, author of *The Blood Remembers* and *Realms of Gold*

After reading *The Messiah Matrix* I find that I am in awe of this achievement. The expanse of Atchity's knowledge and information and the skill with which he doles it out in the guise of a tight tale commands respect and admiration. He is the perfect blend of scholar and story teller... He addresses universal questions of faith and religious beliefs that we all harbor no matter how profound our convictions. You will be provoked to think...as you turn the pages to discover what happens next.--Alex Cord, author of *Feather in the Rain*

THE MESSIAH MATRIX

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By Kenneth John Atchity

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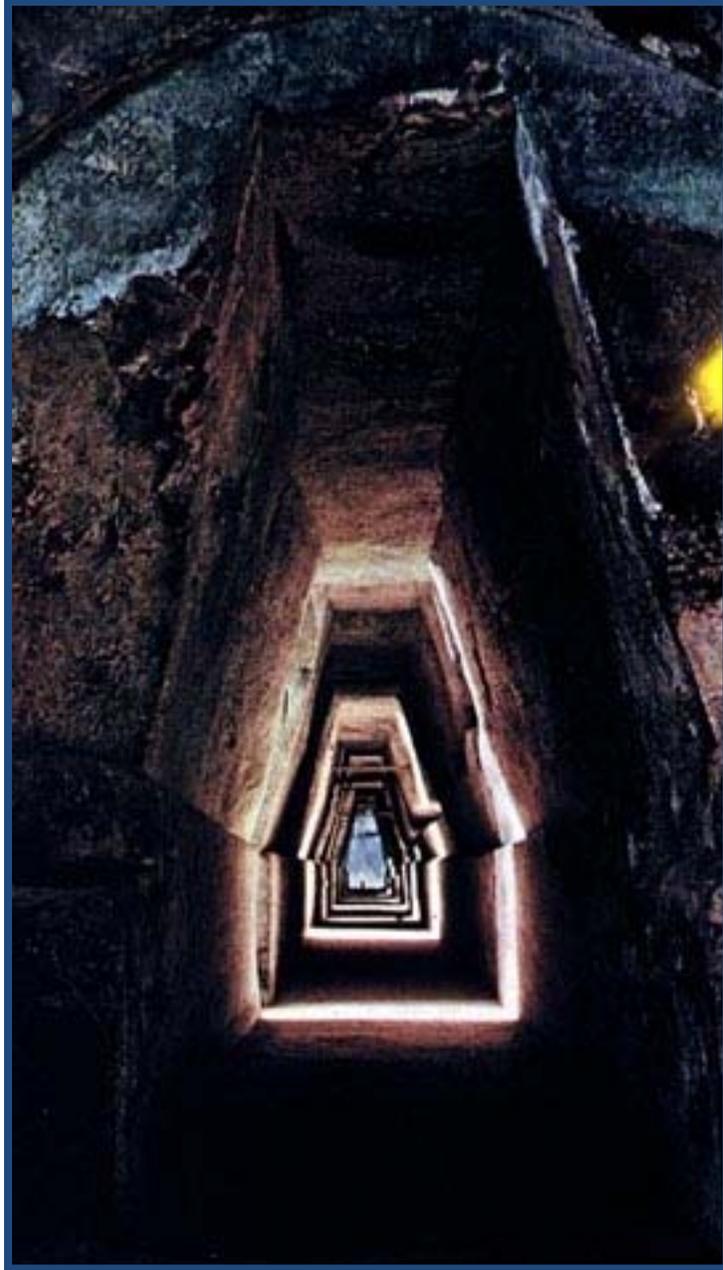
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This is a work of fiction based on elements of ancient history. All incidents and dialogue, and all names and characters, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental except for historical figures.

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www.messiahmatrix.com



For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given,
And the government shall be upon His shoulder.
And His Name shall be called:
Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God,
The Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.
-Isaiah 9:6

We should always be disposed to believe that which appears to us to be white is really black, if the hierarchy of the church so decides. -St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (commonly known as the Jesuits)

Emperor Marcus Aurelius: We should not say I am an Athenian or I am a Roman but I am a citizen of the Universe...For there is only one universe, one God, one truth. -Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Prologue

The three-wheeled truck, having weathered World War II and every day after, carried its battle scars proudly as it hovered on the curb of Via del Plebiscito. Its V-shaped bumper was as jagged as a saw. Behind the wheel its latest owner, Zbysek Bailin, waited patiently, as though he were long accustomed to assassination on a rainy Wednesday evening.

A red umbrella rounded the corner from the Piazza del Gesù. Zbysek took in a breath and turned the ignition key. The engine coughed to an idle, purred raggedly awaiting further command from its driver. The silver-haired man ambled toward the intersection of Via degli Astalli that flanked the rear of the massive church. Purposely leaving his headlight off, Zbysek shifted into gear and bounced into the street. His foot pressed on the reluctant accelerator, the ancient vehicle climbing all too slowly up to speed.

The man had reached the intersection, and as he passed beneath the streetlight Zbysek thought he might well be deaf—he was so lost in thought he didn't seem to hear the rumbling truck, even as it barreled toward him at full speed.

Clutching tight to the shaky steering wheel, Zbysek was hunched forward in the cab, eyes intent on his target. All he

could see was the man's bent back, crawling up Via Astalli like a praying mantis.

In seconds the truck had jumped the curb and was upon him.

The man swung around with his books and umbrella, a look of sudden shock on his face—the smile erased. His coat fell open.

For the first time, Zbysek saw his victim clearly in the light of the street lamp—the crisp white collar and the purple piping on his black vest.

His target was a monsignor!

Zbysek hauled at the wheel—but it was too late. His head struck the roof as the vehicle jerked over the body and slammed straight into the lamppost, thrusting Zbysek into the windshield and cracking his head on the glass. He climbed clumsily out of the cab and fell to his knees beside his victim. "Forgive me, father," Zbysek finally choked out.

The old man's face was twisted with pain. His narrowed eyes were glistening, blood trickling from his lips. He reached his hand toward his Angel of Death. He seemed to want to speak. Zbysek lowered his head to hear. The monsignor's final whispered words confused and frightened him, and he leapt for the three-wheeler and fled from the scene.

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Unholy Thursday

Father Ryan McKeown's mood was less than reverential as he headed for the confessional where he was to perform his priestly duties. The lines of penitents in Gesù were short today. Perhaps because there'd been no major holidays recently or any coming soon, the "occasions of sin" were easier to avoid. Just as Ryan was about to step into the polished mahogany cubicle, a bedraggled man burst into the nave. The man headed for the first confessional, and knelt briefly. Moments later he unceremoniously leapt to his feet to join a short line at the next confessional booth, causing bowed heads to look up in curiosity. Ryan was bemused. *Could a man's sins be so grave he feels the need to come clean of them to several confessors?*



Ryan settled himself behind the ivory baffle and listened, in turn, to an old man cursing God because his arthritis no longer allowed him to play *bocce*; to a teenager who abused himself fourteen times in the past seven days, using the image of his

teacher, a nun, as inspiration—Father Ryan, doing his best to repress a smile, told him to say the rosary and promise never to sin again; and to a seminarian barely out of high school who asked if having concerns about his faith meant he should quit the seminary.

"Doubts are not in themselves a sin," he told the young man. "Thomas, though he doubted, went on to become a great apostle and martyr. Not to mention Mother Teresa, whose troublesome doubts dogged at her heels even more persistently than Calcutta's poor. I can tell you, it's what you do with doubt that matters." He questioned whether his comments had been of any service, or whether he should have simply referred the seminarian to a therapist. He'd often wondered where he'd be today if he himself hadn't rejected psychotherapy as an option.

He was removing his stole to leave when a tardy penitent thumped down on the kneeler and activated the tiny red light. Ryan slid open the grate. In the obscure light he could see only enough to determine that his supplicant was a male. "Yes, my son?"

"Are you Father Ryan?" the man asked.

"Yes," Ryan answered, before he could consider how the penitent could know his name.

"Thank God I've found you."

Ryan realized he was speaking with the lost soul who'd been playing musical confessionals. "How long has it been since your last confession?"

"I killed a priest." Ignoring the sacramental protocol, the man blurted it out in a coarse accent that Ryan had never heard before. Then, remembering the ritual formalities, the man added, "I don't remember my last Confession. Many years ago, in Tirana."

So the accent was Albanian. "What do you mean you killed a priest?"

"I hit him with my truck. He was a monsignor. I tried to help him. His eyes...oh my God! I got scared and drove away."

Ryan's heart went out to the man on the other side of the grate. The anguish in the man's voice was dreadful. "An accident, no matter how grievous, is not a sin," he said. "You simply have to—"

"It wasn't an accident," the immigrant interrupted. "I was paid to run him down."

Ryan fell silent. What fate had led this man to *his* confessional today among so many hundreds in the Holy City?

"They didn't tell me he was a monsignor." Now the man was choking, the guttural sound poignantly wretched. "Oh, my God, I am damned to hell for all eternity."

"Why would you accept payment for such an act?"

"I was desperate—I am desperate. My family has no money, my children need doctors—" The man's explanations gave way to wrenching sobs. Then he regained control. "He looked at me. He told me words I didn't understand. But I will hear them for the rest of my life."

Reflexively Ryan slipped into his persona as an investigative scholar. "What were his words, my son?"

The poor man's scream echoed in the hollowness of the empty church. "No!"

"It's all right to tell me," Ryan said. "You're protected by the Seal of the Confessional, Holy Mother Church's—"

"You don't understand! It was Holy Mother Church...that paid me!"