

BOOK REVIEW

The Gospel According to Judas by Benjamin Iscariot, recounted by Jeffrey Archer with the assistance of Prof. Francis J. Moloney. London: Macmillan, 2007, 96 pages. ISBN-13:978-0-230-52901-4

The name Judas brings a negative connotation to the mind of most Christians. No parent would have their son bear the name Judas at baptism. That name has become the symbol of treachery and betrayal throughout Christendom.

In April 2006 National Geographic Society, after spending more than two years restoring the document and translating it from Coptic¹, an ancient Egyptian language, unveiled publicly the controversial *Gospel of Judas* – a fourth century text, a 31-page papyrus document bound in leather and discovered in a cave in Egypt.² The announcement of this document unleashed a controversy regarding its authenticity since it now challenges the popular Christian version of the story of Jesus' betrayal. In contrast to the canonical Gospels, the supposed *Gospel of Judas* portrays Judas as Jesus' most beloved and trusted disciple. Moreover, it describes the betrayal of Jesus as an event planned by Jesus himself and as part of the divine plan. The Gospel of Judas asserts that the disciples had not learned the true Gospel, which Jesus taught only to Judas Iscariot. While the original author is unknown, the Church Father Irenaeus mentions a *Gospel of Judas* in his anti-Gnostic work *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies) in the year 180 C.E., and he called the group who possessed the gospel *Cainites*, or followers of Cain.³ It is a known fact that during those early days of Christianity, texts considered heretical by the orthodox church authorities were ordered destroyed. Many texts survived since their adherents buried them in obscure places. Some of these texts would be unearthed many centuries later. As far as the *Gospel of Judas* is concerned, an Egyptian farmer rediscovered it in the early 1970s in a cave. The document was being sold to the scholars at a price of \$3 million. Not being purchased it found its way to a bank safe-deposit in New York for 17 years until it was finally acquired by the National

Geographic Society as its private collector. What is the historical value of this document? This document could be helpful in reconstructing the history of Gnosticism, especially in Coptic-speaking areas. Besides that, the NT scholar A.J. Levine emphatically stated that the Gospel of Judas contains no new historical information concerning Jesus or Judas. There have been on-going controversies and disagreements as to the accuracy of the English translation of the Coptic text.

To counter-act this Gnostic text, an intense collaborative effort between a storyteller [Jeffrey Archer] and a scholar [Fr. Francis J. Moloney] resulted in the writing of *The Gospel According to Judas, by Benjamin Iscariot*. When Archer sought the advice of the Scripture scholar Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan “on who should guide him through this demanding project”, the latter particularly singled out his former student at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, the Salesian Francis J. Moloney. The introduction to the *novella* described the project as: “Archer would write a story for twenty-first-century readers, while Moloney would ensure that the result would be credible to a first-century Christian or Jew.” Archer confesses, “I’ve always been mystified why Judas has been called the evil traitor.” Fr. Moloney finds the traditional interpretations of Judas as too simplistic.

Who is Jeffrey Archer? According to Los Angeles Times, Jeffrey Archer is “one of the top ten storytellers in the world.” He is Britain’s top-selling novelist who produced series (e.g., *Kane and Abel* [1979], *The Prodigal Daughter* [1982], and novels (e.g., *The Eleventh Commandment* [1998], *Honour Among Thieves* [1993], *First Among Equals* [1984], and *Prisoner at Birth* [2008]. He has likewise written numerous plays, picture books, and short stories. Archer was a former member of British Parliament and Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party. As a storyteller, Archer is indeed a master who “plots with skill and keeps you turning the pages” (*Boston Globe*).

This provocative *Gospel According to Judas*, purportedly written by Judas’s first born son, Benjamin, is written in numbered verses and follows the narrative style of the canonical Gospels. It consists of twenty-

five chapters with a total of 792 verses. It retells of the story of Jesus through the lens of Judas by using the canonical texts as its basic point of departure. The tone of the *novella* is that of a loyal son attempting to rehabilitate his father's name because he could not accept him as a notorious traitor. This Judas-friendly interpretation of the gospel presents to us Judas Iscariot as a misunderstood disciple and dispels the rumor that he was a traitor, bribe-taker and killer of self. It also sheds light on what happened to him after the crucifixion of Jesus. Judas did not kill himself but survived to tell his story to his son. Besides the canonical gospels as main reference, what intrigues me is Archer never mentioned his other sources. It is not also clear what role Moloney precisely played in the writing of the story.

What are the contentions of the re-created *Gospel According to Judas*?

- Jesus was a child born of Joseph and Mary conceived in the conventional way (p.5).
- In order to bring about Jesus' messianic enthronement, Judas is willing to sacrifice his own life for Jesus (p.41)
- Judas offered to identify Jesus to the Scribe to save Jesus from unnecessary death (pp.71, 72).
- Judas eventually came to believe that Jesus was not the Messiah and he never believed that he was the son of God (pp.63, 75, 83).
- Judas denied that Jesus walked on water (p.87).
- Jesus did not change water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana (p.87).
- Judas wept after the Scribe accused him of being a betrayer (p.77).
- At the Governor's fortress where Pilate presented Jesus to the people, Judas was all alone shouting, "Save him, save him". His lone voice was overwhelmed by the brutal cries of the masses (p.78).
- Judas could not have taken his own life because: (a) Only one of the four gospels said so⁴ (p.88); (b) It is prohibited in the Hebrew Scripture to take one's life. No pious Jew would

ever consider taking his own life (p.88).

- Judas could not accept that Jesus had risen from the dead (p.83)

Archer and Moloney depict that Judas was unremorseful and motivated, not by greed, but by disenchantment over Jesus' refusal to throw the Romans out of the Jewish homeland. Judas belonged to those first-century hard line Jews who expected Jesus to restore the throne of David via military means. But to Judas's disappointment, Jesus was more concerned about helping the poor and the destitute, healing the sick rather than getting rid of the Romans. Thus, when Jesus chose to ride the donkey as he entered the city of Jerusalem in the midst of a powerful Roman army that was a decisive indication for Judas that Jesus is surely not the long-awaited Messiah.

The Gospel According to Judas is very readable account. Whether Archer and Moloney succeed in rehabilitating Judas as the infamous betrayer of Jesus is hard to tell. The authors have solicited the support of leading churchmen including Lord Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town, to vouch for the book. The *Sunday Times* issue of January 7, 2007 reports that "while the archbishops enjoyed reading it, they do not accept all its theories." Pope Benedict XVI has admitted that "the betrayal of Judas remains a mystery." Could it be that history has not treated Judas fairly? In this case, *The Gospel According to Judas* is indeed a compelling story for twenty-first century readers.

Reviewed by Arnold T. Monera

Endnotes

¹ Coptic was the indigenous language of Egypt spoken from C.E. 200 to 1000.

² The current Coptic 4th century text may be a translation from an older Greek manuscript dating to approximately CE 130-180. There is no certainty however whether this text mentioned by Irenaeus is in fact the same as the Coptic “Gospel of Judas” of the extant fourth century. The Codex originally contained 31 pages, *recto verso*, but when it came to the market in 1999, only 13 pages remained. It is speculated that individual pages had been removed and sold. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Judas. Retrieved on 31 January 2008.

³ According to the Church Father, Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310-403 C.E.), the Cainites boasted of being relatives of Cain, the Sodomites, Esau and Korah. Those who know their Bible well will be reminded that these characters are biblical villains. It is no wonder therefore that these people admired Judas Iscariot, the greatest villain of all.

⁴ Of the four Gospels, only Matthew describes Judas’s death by hanging himself.