



The Gospel According to Judas

By Benjamin Iscariot

Recounted by Jeffrey Archer

With the assistance of Prof Francis Moloney

(London: Macmillan, 2007)

A review by Dr Justin Thacker, Evangelical Alliance Head of Theology

This really is a fascinating piece of work. *The Gospel According to Judas*, written by Jeffrey Archer in association with a Catholic scholar, Professor Francis Moloney, is like no other book that I have seen. At its simplest, it is an account of the public life of Jesus Christ in the style of the canonical gospels, and based on the testimony of Judas Iscariot as given to his son, Benjamin Iscariot. Hence, it is not given to wild fantasy or sensationalism like the *The Da Vinci Code*, nor is it a contemporary version of the second-century gnostic 'Gospel of Judas'; it is in a genre all of its own. It is the *Diatessaron* - a second-century harmonised gospel account - blended with some contemporary New Testament scholarship (albeit liberal), written by a disgraced politician and popular novelist; it is remarkable.

The Gospel according to Archer and Moloney

At the press conference that launched the book, Professor Moloney made clear that his motivation was primarily to reach out to the mass market with the gospel of Jesus Christ: "what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ". He emphasised that though some elements in the work may be "improbable", they are at least "possible", and he ensured that no important teaching of Jesus was betrayed. The book is presented in a mock leather cover with gilded edges and a ribbon marker. It is approximately the same length as one of the canonical gospels, and divided into twenty-five chapters, which are further divided into verses. Throughout, in red ink, parts of the canonical gospels are either quoted in full or faithfully paraphrased, and references to these verses are given in the margin. Hence, both visually and in terms of content, these authors are trying to present this work as a gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Archer insists that we call it a gospel, and not a novel. But is it good news for evangelicals?

It is here that a nuanced response must be given. On the one hand, much of this text is an entirely faithful rendition of the biblical account. It is no doubt this factor that led Archbishop Desmond Tutu to agree to read the audio version. Professor Moloney made it clear that he would withdraw his name if the book even strayed towards Dan Brown type fantasies. Apparently, at one point, Archer wanted to include a "conversion experience" for Judas, but Moloney stated that if Archer went ahead with that, then he would pull out completely. We can, therefore, be grateful to Moloney for what, in the most part, is an accurate account of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moloney has also provided a fairly comprehensive glossary at the back of the book that explains and elaborates on some of the issues highlighted in the book.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ?

So, in *The Gospel According to Judas* as retold by Benjamin Iscariot, we see Jesus calling the first disciples, working miracles, driving out demons, eating with tax-collectors, celebrating Passover, being arrested in Gethsemane, tried and crucified – and we even have reports of his resurrection from the dead. All of this is more or less faithfully recounted. However, there are also significant areas where the influence of some contemporary critical New Testament scholarship is evident. In chapter 2, verse 8, doubt is cast on the authenticity of the virgin birth. Moloney acknowledges in the glossary that this is a departure from “the ‘Roman Catholic’ interpretation”, and we might add the ‘Evangelical’ one. Similarly, reflecting some of the more egregious excesses of the Jesus Seminar, the Jesus presented in this gospel appears to have little interest in the ‘Kingdom of God’, nor in his own Messiahship. The book does not declare that Jesus was not the Christ, but it certainly casts doubt on this hypothesis, suggesting, with Judas, that he was merely a prophet, a man of God. On the front cover of the book, in Greek, is a quotation from Matthew 11:3, where John asks, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” It is as if that is the question of the whole book – the question raised in the first half of Mark’s gospel: who is this man? What is missing, though, is the conclusion Peter reaches in Mark 8:29 “You are the Christ”. Hence, although some of Jesus’ miracles are affirmed, others are denied: water into wine, walking on water. In relation to the resurrection, the book is largely supportive. It notes the reports of Mary, the two on the road to Emmaus, and the eleven in the upper room, about the resurrection. And in the glossary, Moloney makes the point that the early church actually believed Jesus had risen from the dead, an important step in the argument for the historicity of the resurrection.

It is, though, in its treatment of Judas that the book departs most clearly from the New Testament account. Overall, Judas is presented in a far more positive light. Indeed, in a deliberate echo of Luke, the book begins: “This gospel is written so that all may know the truth about Judas Iscariot and the role he played in the life and tragic death of Jesus of Nazareth”. Benjamin Iscariot, the pseudonymous author of the book knows these things because his father, Judas, told them to him in later life. The Judas presented in this account is not the one who betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, but rather one who was only trying to protect Jesus from himself. Judas, it is suggested, is the only one who really understood what Jesus was about. Initially Judas has high hopes for Jesus, believing him to be the kingly messiah of some contemporary expectations. However, as it becomes clear that Jesus is not that kind of messiah, Judas loses faith. He still believes him to be a prophet, and man of God, but not the messiah. In fact, this is the first of a series of reversals that then characterise Judas’ relationship to Jesus. In contrast to all the other disciples, Judas is presented as the only one who truly knows who he is (the betrayer becomes the knowing one). Then Judas decides that he can save Jesus from his impending arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem (the betrayer becomes the saviour). Judas enlists the help of a scribe, but the scribe betrays Judas, and leads a gang of temple officers to arrest Jesus (the betrayer becomes the betrayed). At his trial and crucifixion, Judas is the only one of the original twelve who stands by Jesus (the betrayer becomes the faithful one). The biblical narrative of the thirty pieces of silver, and the suicide are simply denied as non-historical. Then, following Jesus’ death, and despite the reports of the resurrection, Judas simply cannot believe that Jesus is risen, so we find him wandering off to join the Essene community at Qumran.

A Gnostic Gospel?

In 2006, the late second-century gnostic 'Gospel of Judas' was revealed to the world. Moloney and Archer have been very keen to emphasise that their work has nothing to do with that 'Gospel'. At the press conference, Moloney went so far as to say that, "Jeffrey and I didn't even discuss the gnostic Gospel of Judas", and that they had, "no interest in it at all." The glossary accompanying their work simply states that "*The Gospel According to Judas* recorded here was not inspired by [that] text." This is largely true. On the one hand, Archer's *Gospel According to Judas* is certainly not a first or even twenty-first century retelling of the gnostic 'Gospel of Judas'. Much of that 'Gospel' is taken up with cosmological musings that reflect the thoroughly dualistic presuppositions of its author: the world of space and time is evil; the non-material, spiritual dimension is good. One consequence of such thinking is that the goal of any rational person is to escape the material world as soon as possible. Hence, in the second-century 'Gospel of Judas', Jesus tells Judas, "You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me". In other words, the real Jesus is not represented by the fleshly person that walked this earth, but rather the soul trapped in that body. Judas can help that real Jesus by liberating him from that body. In Archer and Moloney's *Gospel According to Judas*, we have little of that. Judas is rehabilitated not by reinterpreting his betrayal of Jesus, but rather by denying that he betrayed Jesus at all. Similarly, the denial of the material world that characterised the gnostic 'Gospel' is not especially evident in Archer's *Gospel*. Yet, having said that, there is perhaps more of a connection between the two 'gospels' than Moloney, in particular, would like to admit. Admittedly, this connection is not so much between the text of the two books. Rather, it exists, I would suggest, in a certain gnosticising tendency that is evident in the recent work. I have already drawn attention to the sequence of reversals that exist in the *Gospel According to Judas*, and this kind of discourse is precisely what you find in what NT Wright has called "the strange, topsy-turvy world of gnostic speculation", where "the heroes become villains and vice versa". In addition, there are suggestions that the Judas of Archer's gospel is the only one who sees, whilst the others remain blind. He is the only one with true *gnosis*.

One further connection between the two 'gospels' of Judas is that at the start of the more recent one we are told that, "Several other Gospels have recently been written, giving their version of what took place during Jesus' lifetime. But only a few of them, not accepted by the new sect known as Christians, come close to giving a fair account of my father's actions". In his glossary comment on this, Moloney acknowledges the first century authorship of the canonical gospels, and the late second century authorship of the 'Gospel of Judas'. If one reads the glossary then the implication would be that the canonical gospels are far more reliable, being that much earlier. Yet, the text of Archer's *Gospel* appears to cast doubt on this conclusion. By suggesting that there are other contemporaneous gospels alongside the canonical ones, it implies that the canonical gospels are perhaps not the most reliable source for the historicity of Jesus. Of course, such a line is repeated by some in the academic community, but by no means all. I noted earlier how Moloney stood his ground in relation to Judas' 'conversion experience', but one wonders if he traded some of his academic, if not Catholic, credibility at this point.

In fact, one of the pieces of evidence for the historical reliability of the canonical gospels is hinted at in the text of Archer's *Gospel* itself. The final chapter of the book

has Benjamin travelling to the Essene community to tell his father what is being said about him. Judas responds that, "his own account should be recorded so that all may know the truth of what had taken place". Exactly. If the canonical gospels had not been accurate accounts of what had taken place, then not only Judas, but a whole range of other people would have produced alternative accounts. One of the most compelling reasons we have to trust the New Testament is the complete absence of such alternative accounts until the mid to late second century.

A Gnostic Christianity?

In conclusion, Archer has written a unique 'gospel', in a unique style. Much of it is to be admired, but some of it not. In the preface, the authors express their wish that it "would be credible to a first-century Christian or Jew". This is certainly the case for most of it, but unfortunately there still remains too much that would not be credible to people in any century from the first through to the twenty-first. The question remains, then, why has Archer written it? Some have suggested that, like another convicted Tory politician, Archer has found religion. If so, my concern is that it is not Christianity that he has found, but rather the kind of gnosticised Christianity that is currently doing the rounds (see further reading). I take Moloney at his word when he says his motivation was nothing more than to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to a mass market. However, it is possible that, perhaps unwittingly, some gnostic tendencies have encroached on the gospel he has presented. For instance, the narrative of the 'superior knowledge' of Judas only has credibility because of the 'superior knowledge' of those in the academic community who feel free to dismiss the most reliable sources for the historicity of Jesus. Of course, as NT Wright has pointed out, such claims to 'superior knowledge' do not just affect the world, but also the church, and so the relevance of this book may be in reminding us that such neo-gnosticism continues to need refuting – not least in our own hearts.

Further reading: Wright, T., *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2006), chapter 6.