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Chapter 7

YOUR OWN PERSONAL JUDAS: THE REHABILITATION OF JEFFREY ARCHER

1. Thou Shalt Not Get Caught

Despite Thatcherism-without-Thatcher becoming the political norm by the mid-1990s, this period would simultaneously mark a decline of the Conservative Party in British politics, and in no small part due to the ‘toxic’ image that Thatcher had come to represent. Thatcher was brought down in 1990 by a combination of her confrontational style of running cabinet, Michael Heseltine’s leadership ambitions, the long-serving Geoffrey Howe’s devastating resignation speech, and the deeply unpopular Poll Tax. Her apparently consensual replacement, John Major, had surprisingly managed to win the 1992 General Election outright, but it would be downhill for the Tories from then on. The issue of Europe and the EU was ripping the party apart while, among other things, the BSE crisis, recession, and political ‘sleaze’ all but made a crushing defeat in the 1997 election inevitable and one from which they have only just (about) recovered. ‘Sleaze’ was *the* word that stuck with the Conservative Party throughout the 1990s. This was the era that the Conservatives were embroiled in arms sales to Iraq, cash for parliamentary questions, and perjury trials, not to mention several sex-related stories in which the tabloids happily wallowed. Several Conservative figures became synonymous with ‘sleaze’ in popular imagination, such as David Mellor, Neil Hamilton, and Jonathan Aitken, the latter imprisoned for perjury. Against this backdrop, the sight of several high profile Tories spectacularly losing their parliamentary seats in the 1997 General Election became one of the more striking television moments of late twentieth-century Britain.

When the Conservative Party was trying to rebrand and ‘detoxify’ its image in the early post-1997 years, the behaviour of Jeffrey Archer (born 1940) would never let us forget this era of Conservative politics. As his biographer Michael Crick put it, he ‘never does anything ordinary or dull; every Archer move seems to have that extra twist, and so often an

ingredient of deception and trickery... [He is] one of the most colourful characters in British public life, and...the most dishonest politician in post-war British history.’¹ Few among a British audience would disagree with this assessment. However, his collaborator on Archer’s work on the figure of Judas, the Australian New Testament scholar Francis J. Moloney, was initially unaware of Archer’s reputation in the UK. Moloney claimed that ‘I really admire his honesty and integrity’ while having to acknowledge that his assessment was ‘the exact opposite of what everybody says about him’. Nevertheless, even someone as sympathetic as Moloney had to concede (either with naivety or understatement) that ‘I am sure he is a bit of a villain – I would not doubt that’.² This sort of spectacular understatement or naivety perhaps fails to do full justice to Archer’s life which has been one of a series of dramatic rises and falls – often accompanied by creative financial decisions, flings, mistresses, and a patchy record of remembering the truth.

There are numerous stories of dubious factuality surrounding the early life of Jeffrey Archer, whether these are claims made by him or others on behalf of him. A book on Archer himself can only do full justice to the range of stories and fictions surrounding him and so it is most fortunate that the journalist Michael Crick has provided the most comprehensive account of which the following is a mere summary.³ It is not always entirely clear the degree of involvement that Archer had in claims about whether his father was a decorated war hero or someone who engaged in criminal behaviour, whether his early athletic achievements were quite as impressive as had been pronounced, whether he gained quite as many ‘O’ Levels as Oxford University (or the Oxford Department of Education, to be precise) were led to believe or from where the claim about non-existent ‘A’ Levels originated, or the validity of an award from the International Federation of Physical Culture (IFPC) for teaching PE and entering higher or further education. Archer also claimed to have been the youngest-ever member of the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1967 (aged 27) but even in 1967 a fellow Conservative colleague, Anthony Bradbury, was 25, and in 1964 Gordon Dixon had been a member at 26.⁴

1. M. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer: Stranger than Fiction* (rev. edn; London: Forth Estate, 2000), p. xiii; cf. p. 431. Or again, P. Kelso, ‘Mendacious, ambitious, generous and naïve’, *Guardian* (July 20, 2001): ‘He is by turns mendacious, egotistical, ambitious, pushy, resilient, tactless, gullible, funny, charming, reckless, hard working, generous, self-obsessed, loyal and naïve’.

2. Maloney quotations are collected in R. Gledhill, ‘Jesus was no miracle worker: the Gospel of Jeffrey Archer’, *Times* (March 21, 2007).

3. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*.

4. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 120.

Despite claims made on book covers and by Archer himself, he was not, at 29 years of age, the youngest MP when elected in a 1969 by-election. Earlier in 1969, Bernadette Devlin, then aged 22, was also elected in a by-election, and others such as John Ryan, Les Huckfield, and the Conservative Christopher Ward were all younger, thereby making Archer the fifth youngest.⁵

These seemingly minor issues would foreshadow greater scandal and controversies. As a GLC councillor, as Crick would later document, he would assist colleagues with expenses for a 10 percent cut.⁶ However, the first major scandal-in-the-making involved his charity work for the United Nations Association (UNA) and more claims of extravagant and misleading approaches to expenses. The chair of UNA was Humphrey Berkeley who challenged whether Archer was fit to be selected as a Conservative MP for Louth in the 1969 by-election. These doubts were dismissed and Archer sued Berkeley for libel in a case which would continue for three years. This was eventually settled out of court: Berkeley did not have to retract his claims or apologise, Archer had to cover the costs for both himself and Berkeley, and the terms of the settlement were not to be disclosed.⁷ Murky though the outcome of the Berkeley case was, Archer's first serious fall came in 1974 and this time it did cost him his Louth seat. Guilty more of bad judgment, Archer was the victim of the Aquablast fraud which led to massive financial losses and near bankruptcy. This loss forced Archer to step down as MP for Louth but it was also the catalyst (and even inspiration) for his unstoppable rise as a novelist with his first book, *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less* (1976). It was this side (or perhaps main) career which would go on to make him a multi-millionaire. Yet, in the aftermath of the Aquablast scandal the seeds of another fall were sown: Archer would tell another story that would, like many of his explanations, grow uncontrollably in later decades. While he denied the allegation of theft, he was accused of stealing suits from a store in Toronto whilst he was serving as a witness.⁸ Some twenty years later he would try to explain the situation by claiming that he had accidentally taken the suits but thought he was still in the shop. Furthermore, he had claimed that he had crossed a bridge to another shop while thinking he was still in the same one. And therein lay another problem: the bridge did not exist at the time of the alleged theft (see below).

5. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 147-48.

6. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 122-23, 141.

7. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 124-27, 140-46

8. P. Foot, 'Those Suits', *London Review of Books* 17 (May 1995), p. 14.

Despite reservations of leading Tories, Archer was made Conservative Party Deputy Chairman in 1985 but a year later resigned due to a scandal that would mark the rest of his career. The *News of the World* led the way with a story accusing Archer of organising a payment for the sex-worker, Monica Coghlan, to leave the country. The *Daily Star* went further still by claiming what had previously been implied: Archer had had sex with a prostitute. Archer sued the *Daily Star*, claiming that his payment to Coghlan was a charitable act. Archer won the case and £500,000 in damages. This cost the editor of the *Daily Star* his job, even though the journalist Adam Raphael would find evidence of Archer's perjury. But with his stunning victory, newspapers were now reluctant to risk challenging Archer's reputation.

This was not the last Archer would hear of the Coghlan case but in the meantime another infamous allegation of financial irregularity would emerge in 1994 when it was revealed that the Department of Trade and Industry were investigating Archer – now Baron Archer of Weston-super-Mare of Mark in the County of Somerset – over allegations of insider dealing. It had been alleged that Archer had attempted to buy shares in Anglia Television, a company which boasted his wife, Mary Archer, as a non-executive director, around the time when there was an agreed takeover bid by MAI plc. Archer vigorously denied the claims.⁹ Archer pleaded ignorance and lack of evidence meant there would be no prosecution. Crick claimed that 'no other politician would have got away with Anglia on top of everything that had gone before. The press got to him but only over the things that weren't the serious things – the mistresses and the gaffes.'¹⁰

In October 1999 Archer won the vote to become the Conservative candidate for the newly formed post of Mayor of London. However, now the mustard seed would bloom in full. The endless financial arrangements and the Coghlan affair story would eventually come to include attempts to round-up various people to cover for him with some massive financial incentives, deals over intellectual property rights and information about Archer, convenient holidays, and, for Terence Baker (who appeared to have lied for Archer), film and TV rights for his books.¹¹ But, more specifically, Ted Francis (who claimed he was owed money by Archer) and Angela Peppiatt (Archer's former secretary) claimed

9. Financial and political staff, 'Archer in DTI Shares Inquiry', *Guardian* (July 8, 1994); Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 405-18.

10. L. Jury, 'The fall of Jeffrey Archer: the media-enemies ensured that the whiff of scandal lingered', *Independent* (July 20, 2001).

11. Cf. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 296-312.

Archer's alibi in the 1987 trial was a lie based on Peppiatt's diary which she had kept at the time. Despite initial staunch support from the Tory leader William Hague, in 2000 Archer was removed as the Conservative candidate for London Mayor and expelled from the Conservative Party. The difference a month makes in politics is clear enough:

This candidate [Jeffrey Archer] is a candidate of probity and integrity. I am going to back him to the full. (William Hague, October 1999)¹²

This is the end of politics for Jeffrey Archer. I will not tolerate behaviour like this in my party. (William Hague, November 1999)¹³

Shortly after, Scotland Yard charged Archer with perjury and perverting the course of justice. Presumably with unintentional comic timing, he was charged during the running of his play, *The Accused*, in which Archer starred as a man accused of murdering his own wife and where the audience act as jury by casting their verdicts of guilty or not guilty.¹⁴ On July 19, 2001 Archer was finally sentenced to four years' imprisonment before being released after two years on July 21, 2003. Judge Mr Justice Potts described the case, which included everything from bribery to Archer pressuring his secretary to forge diary entries, 'as serious an offence of perjury as I have had experience of and have been able to find in the books'.¹⁵ In 2002, Archer had to repay the *Daily Star*, as well as cover legal costs.

This was not quite the end of matters. During his imprisonment his charity work was being scrutinised further and the cause with which he has become most associated: the fate of the Kurds. After seeing what was happening to 800,000 Kurds after the Gulf War, Archer proposed a targeted fund-raising programme under the name Simple Truth which involved the British Red Cross, £10 million of British government money, Chris de Burgh, and a multi-location international rock concert which would include such inviting luminaries as MC Hammer, Rod Stewart, Sting, New Kids on the Block, Gloria Estefan, and Peter Gabriel. But there were the inevitable difficulties such as doubts about

12. *Channel 4 News* (October 4, 1999), quoted in Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 444.

13. 'I had to top Archer', *BBC News* (November 23, 1999), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/533362.stm.

14. J. Archer, *The Accused* (London: Methuen, 2000). For the details surrounding Archer's arrest see P. Kelso and N. Hopkins, 'Archer takes refuge on stage from a real life drama', *Guardian* (September 27, 2000).

15. 'Archer jailed for perjury', *BBC News* (July 19, 2001), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1424501.stm>. Reports of the trial are collected on the *Guardian* website. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/archer/subsectionmenu/0,5667,522617,00.html>.

whether the funds from different governments were actually generated by Archer and Simple Truth, Archer's non-disclosure of all the information about donations, and a lack of clarification on whether most of the £57 million raised had reached Kurdistan. Among many other things (including potentially upsetting delicate geopolitical balances)—Archer's behaviour led to direct public criticisms from the Kurdish Disaster Fund—were reports that relief supplies had unfortunately ended up in the hands of Iraqi troops and Saddam Hussein's family as well as allegations surrounding Archer's behaviour in potential oil deals.¹⁶

2. Abel, Not Cain

After his release from prison, Archer made some explicit attempts at purifying his name and image, with his prison diaries being just one example.¹⁷ Archer's public purification was also carried out elsewhere in the British media. Roy Hattersley wrote a profile of Jeffrey Archer for the *Sunday Times*, adding that Archer was constantly wanting to be rehabilitated in the public eye. Indeed, Archer spoke to Hattersley of his worry that the British public would be sceptical of him after 'what *seems* to be a long pattern of dubious behaviour'.¹⁸ The most popular vehicle for public rehabilitation in recent years has, of course, been television. Despite the sheer amount of celebrity-centred reality television readily available for Archer to parade himself, his television choices might still

16. For the details of Archer and his involvement with Kurds, see Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 367-82. See also M. Tempest, 'Archer fraud allegations: the simple truth', *Guardian* (August 16, 2001). The Archerean absurdities ran throughout this episode. Compare Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 367-69, 376: 'And the story of his efforts to help the Kurds would encapsulate many of Archer's best and worst qualities. On the one hand he brought to the Kurdish appeal his compassion, energy and unquenchable self-belief; yet at the same time his efforts suffered from his customary lack of attention to detail, bad judgement, and exaggeration of his own achievements... He was joined by two young Kurds based in London, Brook Saib and Nadhim Zahawi... Archer dubbed the two friends Bean Kurd and Lemon Kurd... attempting a little Kurdish, he tried to get the crowd to chant "Long Live Kurdistan!"; due to a slight mispronunciation, however, his words came out as the equivalent of "Bastard Kurdistan!"'

17. J. Archer, *A Prison Diary. Vol. 1, Belmarsh: Hell* (London: Macmillan, 2002); J. Archer, *A Prison Diary. Vol. 2, Wayland: Purgatory* (London: Macmillan, 2003); J. Archer, *A Prison Diary. Vol. 3, North Sea Camp: Heaven* (London: Macmillan, 2004).

18. R. Hattersley, 'The Big Dipper: an interview with Jeffrey Archer', *Sunday Times* (February 19, 2006) (my italics). Hattersley also pointed this out on BBC 1's *Heaven and Earth Show* (April 15, 2007).

be said to constitute a bizarre Archerean twist. Archer – alongside minor celebrities such as the rapper MegaMan from So Solid Crew, the pop star and cheese-maker Alex James, *Eastenders*' Patsy Palmer, and the former footballer Stan Collymore – found himself on the more reputable side of the courtroom as part of a jury who had to decide on a fictional court case in the BBC2 programme, *The Verdict* (first aired: December 2006).¹⁹ In yet *another* bizarre Archerean twist, Archer even managed to reinvent himself further still as the morally upstanding 'goodie' judge on the ITV programme, *Fortune: Million Pound Giveaway* (first aired: January 2007), where members of the public make a case to a panel of millionaires, like Archer, for 'worthy cause' money.²⁰

But it was also the cultural power of the Bible, combined with his own success as a novelist, to which Archer turned in his attempted rehabilitation. In particular, Archer, in collaboration with Moloney, wrote *The Gospel according to Judas by Benjamin Iscariot* (2007).²¹ Biblical allusions would have been nothing new to devotees of Archer's fiction or anyone even casually aware of Archer's novels, or at least those not suffering Bible-blindness. Archer's fondness for popular idioms almost inevitably means that these idioms will include biblical or quasi-biblical idioms (see further Chapter 9) and the biblical basis of these idioms are sometimes loosely woven into the plot structure, as we see, for instance, in *Kane and Abel* (1979), *The Prodigal Daughter* (1982, following on from *Kane and Abel*), *The Eleventh Commandment* (1998), and *The Sins of the Father* (2012). In a nod to Dante, his three-volume prison diaries also have the subtitle titles, *Hell* (2002), *Purgatory* (2003), and *Heaven* (2004). However, the *Gospel according to Judas* is something altogether different: it is presented and written as if it *were* a Bible or a book of the Bible. It is complete with mock-leather Bible cover, red-letters for Jesus' words, chapters and verses, gold-coloured page edges, and attached tassel book-mark. This obviously plays on the idea of the Bible as having some sort of cultural power (see Conclusion) and, among other things, already tells us how much importance is being placed in the story Archer is going to present us.

19. The homepage is: http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2006/12_december/12/bbctwo_verdict.shtml.

20. See also C. Brooker, 'Screen Burn', *Guardian* (February 3, 2007). The homepage for *Fortune: Million Pound Giveaway* is: <http://www.itv.com/page.asp?partid=7130>.

21. J. Archer with F.J. Maloney, *The Gospel according to Judas by Benjamin Iscariot* (London: Macmillan, 2007).

In this fictional gospel, Judas' son, Benjamin, recounts his father's story because Judas' name has been horrendously blackened and so it is up to Benjamin to set the record straight. Judas was a follower of Jesus but mistakenly thinks Jesus was to be a more nationalistic Messiah who would drive out the Romans. Despite doubting, Judas continually felt a tremendous sense of loyalty – in contrast to certain disciples, and Peter in particular – and sought to get Jesus out of Jerusalem to safety. This would have given Judas a unique position, for 'he alone among the disciples could now save his Master, and with him the fate of Israel'.²² Unfortunately, a scribe was to take advantage of Judas' caring side by pretending to help but this scribe really wanted details of location in order to kill Jesus. The scribe then betrayed Judas, labelling him the betrayer. A heartbroken Judas retired to Qumran whilst various documents and Christian figures invented lies about him. Obviously, the Gospel images of Judas-as-betrayer (at least according to popular and most academic readings) would be problematic for Archer's agenda, hence the explicit rejection or retelling of the Gospel accounts in the *Gospel according to Judas*.

The artistic rehabilitation of Judas is nothing new but there was no doubt a more immediate influence on Archer's choice of subject. One year prior to the publication of the *Gospel according to Judas* was the sensational publication of the ancient *Gospel of Judas* which would have provided Archer with an obvious and immediate source of inspiration. Two major interpretations of this ancient text have involved the guilt of Judas. Put simply, one (associated with Marvin Meyer and others) claimed that the *Gospel of Judas* defended Judas's role as necessary (in line with some modern and implicitly Christianizing Judases); the other (associated with April DeConick and others) claimed the *Gospel of Judas* is in line with the traditional interpretation that Judas was to be blamed. However, the initially proposed view that Judas was largely innocent was the one that made all the headlines across the world and has been the dominant interpretation reported across the mainstream British media, including a documentary on the National Geographic Channel on Sunday, April 9, 2006.²³

22. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 64.

23. E.g. 'Judas "Helped Jesus Save Mankind"', *BBC News* (April 7, 2006). <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4882420.stm>; J. Borger and S. Bates, 'Judas: this is what really happened', *Guardian* (April 7, 2006); J. Petre, 'Gospel of Judas presents traitor as Jesus's favourite', *Telegraph* (April 7, 2006); P. Vallely and A. Buncombe, 'History of Christianity: The Gospel according to Judas', *Independent* (April 7, 2006).

Some of the more modern Judases in film and literature, which are, of course, free to move away from the starkly negative portrayals of Judas-as-arch-betrayer, provide a more recent tradition into which Archer's Judas can generally slot.²⁴ Probably more than any other film portrayal of Judas of immediate or more broadly 'unconscious' relevance for studying Archer's *Gospel according to Judas* is Martin Scorsese's controversial 1988 film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, where several issues broadly echoed in Archer's *Gospel according to Judas* can be found. Scorsese's Judas is not naïve and innocent like Archer's Judas but Scorsese does, crucially, have a degree of sympathy in his portrayal of Judas. Scorsese's ginger Judas picked up on certain modern rethinkings of Judas in that he is an anti-Roman revolutionary who also feels a sense of betrayal in his accusation levelled at the crucifix-making Jesus effectively being a Roman collaborator. Scorsese's pragmatic and thoughtful Judas is smarter and more decisive than the other disciples, and even shoots Peter down in one heated argument. Jesus and Judas discuss their different messianic theologies and even have the odd scene of intimacy, bordering on the homoerotic. An intrigued Judas thinks hard about whether to follow a Zealot command to kill Jesus and openly discusses with Jesus that he will kill him should he step out of line. Clearly, Scorsese's Judas is no cardboard baddie and there is some thought gone into Judas' understandable motivations. Like Archer's *Judas*, *Last Temptation* explicitly distances itself from the official orthodox line by prefacing the film with a statement that the film is *fictional* and *not* based on the Gospels.

3. First among Equals

These examples provide a general cultural context in which *Gospel according to Judas* was written and could be written. But there is that other hugely significant influence on *Gospel according to Judas*: Archer's own life. Most non-British readers may not be so familiar with the career of Jeffrey Archer beyond Archer-the-novelist. However, the biographical profile of the authors in *Gospel according to Judas* may not be the most helpful in the case of Archer, though it is not too difficult to imagine readers and reading communities up and down the UK filling in at least some of the gaps. The profile merely tells us how Archer is an Oxford-educated, international best-selling author who was a former Member of

24. See e.g. Pyper, *An Unsuitable Book*, Chapter 6; Walsh, 'The Gospel according to Judas', pp. 37-53; R.G. Walsh, *Three Versions of Judas* (London: Equinox, 2010).

Parliament and who is currently a Member of the House of Lords, adding that he lives with his wife Mary at the Old Vicarage, Grantchester.

What Archer's biographical profile did not give, then, were all the reasons for why Archer became such a well-known figure in the UK. But given that the reader of this chapter now has no excuse for not knowing about Archer's colourful life, how could we not already claim what looks to be the blindingly obvious conclusion that *Gospel according to Judas* is more-or-less Archer's own view of Archer's plea of relative innocence? How Britain's most infamous politician has been misunderstood, just like Judas before him! If the hypothetical reader of this chapter is not prepared to make this kind of casual connection, it does not mean others did not in some of the early reactions to *Gospel according to Judas* (in some cases, even before it was read). Mark Goodacre's then *NT Gateway* blog reported the publishing of *Gospel according to Judas* and this led to several comments. 'Mike', for instance, commented:

Not only a new gospel, also a new parable? the parable of Jeffrey Archer:

Watch you say (about me), the villain [*sic*] is never who one thinks.
Even in your Good Book: Juda is innocent, but the Evangelists were spin doctors!²⁵

On his blog, *Thought Experiments*, journalist and author Bryan Appleyard had had enough when (January 8, 2007) he heard of the publication of *Judas*: 'The rehabilitation of Jeffrey Archer has gone too far'. One of the comments makes the crucial connection even more explicit. James Hooley said, 'Do I detect a sneaky allegorical undertone to this publication? I mean, let's face it, Judas fell in with the wrong crowd and some dirty money changed hands.'²⁶ On his blog, *Cultural Snow*, music and culture writer Tim Footman admitted (March 26, 2007) that he had not read the book but, like many journalists, he still felt he could say something analytical. 'Archer's new book is blatantly autobiographical', he added, 'a fact that will be obvious to all but the most clueless reader'.²⁷ Strong words indeed from someone who openly admitted to not having read the book. On Archer's blog, where the moderated comments are unashamedly overflowing with staggeringly high praise for Archer's

25. M. Goodacre, 'Archer and Moloney's Gospel of Judas', *NT Blog* (March 20, 2007), <http://ntweblog.blogspot.co.uk/2007/03/archer-and-moloneys-gospel-of-judas.html>. I have retained the original typographical errors.

26. B. Appleyard, 'Jeffrey and Judas', *Thought Experiments* (January 8, 2007), <http://bryanappleyard.com/jeffrey-and-judas/>.

27. T. Footman, 'By Request: Thirty Pieces of Archer', *Cultural Snow* (March 26, 2007), <http://culturalsnow.blogspot.com/search/label/Jeffrey%20Archer>.

life and work, he announced (January 9, 2007) the publication of *Gospel according to Judas*, much to the delight of his loyal followers. And here too there were questions – though Archer obviously could not give answers prior to the publication – relating to the connections between Judas and Archer. For instance, ‘the pixie’ asked, ‘Reading between the lines, do you identify a little with Judas? In that you’ve both been treated, some might argue, unfairly.’²⁸

The world of the mainstream British media had a similar cynical reaction to the non-Archer blogs. The review of Archer’s book by Ann Widdecombe – one of the few members of the contemporary British Conservative party to rival Archer’s fame in the British media – ran with the deliberately ambiguous title: ‘Can a Reputation Be Rescued?’ Tellingly, Archer’s former colleague added, ‘Archer wrote this book knowing that everyone would draw parallels with his own life’. ‘Come on, Jeffrey’, Widdecombe exclaimed more colourfully, ‘he had just betrayed the Messiah, not the Conservative party’.²⁹ In a television interview, Andrew Pierce, deputy editor of the long-time Conservative-supporting British broadsheet, the *Daily Telegraph*, saw the book as a ‘metaphor’ for Jeffrey Archer’s life with the intention of the rehabilitation of both Judas *and* Archer, a view echoed in the studio by the former Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, Roy Hattersley.³⁰

Inevitably, spoofs based on the overlap between Judas and Archer got developed in the press. A *Guardian* take outrageously overlapped the lives of both, with more than a little poetic license and little concern for the details of *Gospel according to Judas*.³¹ In the *Sunday Telegraph*, Oliver Pritchett sent up *Gospel according to Judas* with a mock-reconstruction of a great archaeological find and, once again, the humour was based more on Archer’s life than the details of *Gospel according to Judas*:

28. J. Archer, ‘The Gospel according to Judas’, *Jeffrey Archer’s Official Blog* (January 9, 2007), <http://jeffreycharchers.blogspot.com/2007/01/gospel-according-to-judas.html>.

29. A. Widdecombe, ‘Can a reputation be rescued?’, *Guardian* (April 7, 2007).

30. Comments again made on the *Heaven and Earth Show* (UK), BBC1, April 15, 2007, to the cheery husband and wife team, Carrie and David Grant, briefly known for their Sunday morning theological analysis in addition to, among other things, their singing and dancing expertise on BBC1’s *Fame Academy*.

31. J. Crace, ‘The Gospel according to Judas by Benjamin Iscariot and Recounted by Jeffrey Archer and Prof. Francis J Moloney’, *Guardian* (March 27, 2007).

In a sensational development, archaeologists have found some ancient scrolls in a remote cave and they believe these may have been written by Judas Iscariot. This could well change our perception of one of the most reviled men in history. The work appears to be an account of the life of Jeffrey Archer.

The author of these scrolls (thought to be Judas) describes how he managed to piece together the story, using an ancient papyrus of a publisher's blurb found in a dried-up riverbed near Grantchester... The story of his downfall now appears to be a myth. It has been assumed that Archer was found guilty of perjury, but this was almost certainly the result of a mishearing in oral history. His crime was actually perfectionism.³²

The lack of concern for the details of the *Gospel according to Judas*, even among those who have read the book, is a common thread across the popular claims that Judas is really Archer.

At this point, the shooting down of popular mob mentality might be expected, particularly as most arguments for the identification of Archer with Judas lack details and serious evidence. But if Archer does one thing well, it is his sheer predictability of trying to establish his innocence to the Great British Public.³³ So, instead, what I will do is to show that all the detailed evidence in fact *confirms* the instinctive evidence-lite/free, knee-jerk reaction of those among the trolls, newspaper readers, politicians, and broadsheet hacks who were right to think that the *Gospel according to Judas* was in fact Archer's transparent attempt at resurrecting his public persona.

4. A Matter of Honour

So how did the art itself really reflect the man? Well, obviously, the correspondence is not always one-for-one. Archer may have many faults but, unlike his Judas, he surely would never have difficulties sleeping under the roof of an 'impure man who owed his wealth and position to a

32. O. Pritchett, 'What Would Judas Make of Jeffrey?', *Sunday Telegraph* (March 25, 2007).

33. The predictions of two journalists who investigated Archer are worth citing in this respect. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 467, foresaw as follows: 'Even if he follows Jonathan Aitken to jail as a result of the current perjury investigation by the police, Archer will work all the harder to redeem himself, perhaps with a huge charity campaign, or a project in one of his favourite fields – the theatre, art or sport'. According to Adam Raphael, 'His guilt was writ large', *Observer* (July 22, 2001): 'I have little doubt that he [Archer] will bounce out of jail in two years' time... [T]he odd spot of adversity will not dent his ability to entertain and flatter the famous.'

race of disbelievers'.³⁴ Yet, on the other hand, is it really possible for anyone, at least a British audience or anyone familiar with Archer's life, to read the opening chapter of *Judas* and not think, *this is Archer according to Archer*?

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... Indeed, they have blackened my father's name to the point where he is now thought of as the most infamous of all Jesus' followers. He has been branded a traitor, a thief and a man willing to accept bribes... The Christians continue to spread the word throughout Galilee that Judas was a man of violence, a hanger-on and someone who could not be trusted. Despite contrary evidence, these libels are still abroad and often repeated by the followers of Jesus, even to this present day... [M]y father became a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, and was so trusted by the Master that he was later chosen to be one of his twelve disciples... My father has now returned to the God he loved and served so faithfully.³⁵

No matter how strong the allegations made against Archer, this does not mean, of course, that Archer accepts them all. What is most significant for our purposes is how Archer reacted to criticisms levelled at his reputation. In his prison diaries, Archer stresses that he was not given a fair trial, that Justice Potts' summary was extremely one-sided and biased in advance, and that numerous allegations were simply false.³⁶

With such general comments in mind, we might add that there are some fairly transparent Judas-as-Archer themes. One is *money*, and in particular Judas' role as treasurer of the Jesus movement: Judas gets the common purse, makes sure all get something to eat, are clothed, have shelter, and so on.³⁷ However, like Archer himself, Judas gets accused of financial improprieties, even though the explanations given are innocent misunderstandings (e.g. running out of money). Of course, Archer does not think Judas has done wrong in his important position and so it is no surprise that when Benjamin complains that the jar of precious ointment could be sold for three hundred denarii, a couple of disciples 'murmured' that Judas was going to retain the money (cf. John 12.6).³⁸

We all know that we should always be looking out for deeper meanings and not read texts woodenly but if ever there were an exception then this must be it. The theme of general innocence over all things financial is as much a theme in Archer's life as it is in the *Gospel according to*

34. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 54.

35. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, pp. 1-3.

36. E.g. Archer, *Hell*, pp. 86, 87-88, 93, 115; Archer, *Purgatory*, p. 155.

37. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 42.

38. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 66.

Judas. In his prison diaries, for instance, Archer attacked Emma Nicholson ‘for hinting that the millions of pounds I helped raise for the Kurds didn’t reach them, with the twisted implication that some of the money must therefore have ended up in my pocket’.³⁹ But perhaps most remarkably, Archer gave a telling reaction in his 2007 interview with Roy Hattersley in answer to a question about the Humphrey Berkeley affair when, after claiming that there has never been any suggestion of financial impropriety in his life, he repeated that he could not remember whether he had paid Berkeley’s legal costs. Staggering though such comments might ordinarily seem, in the context of Archer’s life and consistent behaviour, perhaps they are not. Indeed, Hattersley claimed that he did not doubt that Archer was convinced of his own innocence.⁴⁰

Of course, not even Archer believes he is always sweet and innocent. As he proclaimed in the run-up to the mayoral elections: ‘if you’re only going to have a saint for this job, I’m certainly not your man’.⁴¹ With all the above in mind, Judas’ narrative role gets highlighted at some very notable places. In Chapter 9, one of the most obvious Judas-is-really-Archer chapters, issues of forgiveness and the dangers of hypocrisy get hammered home (read: *you lot are at least as bad as me!*). For example, Judas is curious about Jesus’ prayers to his ‘Father in heaven’ and it is Judas who asks Jesus to teach the disciples how to pray, rather than the anonymous disciple of Luke 11.1. And, of course, Jesus then delivered the Lord’s Prayer which includes those famous words, ‘Forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others’.⁴² Just prior to this, Judas wept when Jesus preached about how easy it is to love those who love you but trickier to be compassionate and bring unity in contexts of division and so the mercy of the Father must be imitated.⁴³ Jesus continued by telling people not to condemn or judge others because everyone was guilty of some offence. In case you did not get that, Judas reinforced these words by passing them on to those not present to hear, all the while, of course, reinforcing these words to the reading audience. And, to cap things off, Jesus then speaks more on how bad it is to be *judgmental* (Luke 6.41; Matt. 7.3), wise words which Judas enthusiastically endorses.⁴⁴

You do not need me to connect the obvious.

39. Archer, *Hell*, p. 89; cf. pp. 113, 145, 146, 149.

40. Hattersley, ‘The Big Dipper’.

41. ‘I’m no saint, says Lord Archer’, *BBC News* (September 5, 1999), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/438941.stm.

42. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 31.

43. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 29.

44. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 30.

5. False Impression: Who Betrayed Whom?

Peter plays a crucial role in Archer's narrative by making some serious errors and is consistently compared to, and contrasted with, Judas. Chapter 14 is a notably anti-Petrine section. When Judas warned Peter that the coffers were running low and that Jesus ought to be informed, Peter refused and told Judas to continue to do Jesus' bidding without question.⁴⁵ This would lead to a problem covering costs when they all arrived in Jerusalem.⁴⁶ When Judas wanted to question Peter about Jesus' apparently troubling teachings Peter ignored poor Judas.⁴⁷ Peter was not supposed to tell anyone about the Transfiguration but could not hide his joy and blurted it out to Judas.⁴⁸ Peter is also the one who suspected Judas of financial irregularities.⁴⁹ When Jesus says that someone will betray him at the Last Supper,⁵⁰ it is clear what Judas thought: he was innocent of betraying Jesus as all he wanted to do was to save Jesus from a pointless death. However, immediately following, we are told that Peter was the most vehement in his denial and protested, saying he would lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus, of course responded with the famous cock crowing saying (Mark 14.30; Matt. 26.34; Luke 22.34) before an even more passionate response.

After Jesus was arrested, Judas, wanting to see if he could rescue Jesus, started to approach Peter, 'confident' that together they could save Jesus' life. But at that moment he witnessed Peter denying Jesus three times. The *Gospel according to Judas* makes the parallelism between the two crystal clear: both failed the Master but, Judas thought, both could still be redeemed.⁵¹ But Peter says it would have been better had Judas not been born and, not for the first time, Judas felt 'betrayed'. After all, (and how about this for an emphatic nod to the knowing reader), *he* did not flee when Jesus was arrested and, unlike Peter, *he* had not denied Jesus (three times!) so why was *he* the one branded a sinner?⁵²

45. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 48.

46. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, pp. 52-53.

47. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, pp. 48-49.

48. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, pp. 49-50.

49. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 66. Peter is not *entirely* bad. For instance, like Judas, he wonders why Zacchaeus only has to give away half his money while the rich young man had to give all of his away (p. 54).

50. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 70.

51. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 76.

52. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, pp. 76-77.

Forty years after the crucifixion, Benjamin informs his now Qumran-dwelling Essene father that there was a gospel being spread around the world, saying *Peter* had given the direction to strike Judas' name off the list of disciples originally chosen by Jesus. Moreover, *the disciples* invented all the stories of Judas we know (e.g. the hanging, the thirty pieces of silver). Consequently, Judas demanded that his story should be put forward to provide a record of the truth and was, fortunately enough, able to recall every detail from forty years previous.⁵³

There should be little doubt, then, that *Gospel according to Judas* deliberately highlights the sins of Peter and other disciples to show that Judas was not deserving of his fate. Indeed, Archer has been quite explicit about this. In one recent interview, Archer said that Judas had a 'rough deal' and, given that disciples like Peter made serious mistakes, why is it that Judas has to be the biggest sinner in history?⁵⁴

Yet, once again, it is difficult not to see parallels in Archer's life and the treatment he received compared to others. Recall the 1990s and the Golden Era of Sleaze for the Conservative Party. During Archer's downfall, even his staunch supporter, William Hague, had to distance himself from Archer in particular in an attempt to rid the Conservative Party of its sleazy image, adding that Archer had let the party down.⁵⁵ Hague's successor, Iain Duncan Smith, said that Archer would not be welcome back in the Conservative Party on his release while in 2005 a spokesperson for the now Conservative leader, David Cameron, made it clear that Archer was still not welcome, emphatically stressing that 'Lord Archer's days as an active politician are over'.⁵⁶

53. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, pp. 88-89.

54. Interview with Jeffrey Archer on the *Heaven and Earth Show* (UK), BBC1 (April 15, 2007).

55. P. Wintour, 'Disgraced Archer quits over plot to lie in court', *Observer* (November 21, 1999).

56. Press Association, 'Tory leader: Archer not welcome', *Guardian* (July 22, 2003); N. Temko, 'No way back for Archer, says Cameron', *Observer* (November 27, 2005). Notably, in the comments section of Archer's blog, Cameron comes in for some criticism by 'David': 'Glad you are still going strong with your book tour. I am afraid the UK is also guilty of voting on looks rather than ability... I think William Hague would have been a fine PM but wasn't given the chance... and now the Tories have gone with what they perceive as the right look with David Cameron' (<https://www2.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=29716984&postID=5467280395729419147>).

But, from Archer's perspective at least, why single him out? There were plenty of other disciples who misbehaved: the Mellors, the Aitkens, the Hamiltons, and so on. Mellor, like Archer, was involved in a sex scandal, but Aitken was involved in arms deals while Hamilton was involved in cash for parliamentary questions, both of which could easily be seen as morally more questionable. Yet Archer remains the most infamous of them all.⁵⁷ It is also worth mentioning Archer's main rival to be Conservative candidate for London Mayor, Steven Norris. Norris had served in Thatcher's government as a Parliamentary Private Secretary but had been one of the many MPs who persuaded Michael Heseltine to stand against her, ultimately bringing Thatcher's reign to an end. As for Thatcher's successor, John Major, Norris famously said in the 1995 leadership campaign that he was the 'least worst option'! Archer, on the other hand, had been a staunch supporter of both Thatcher and Major – publicly, privately, and personally – yet several figures within the Conservative party were deeply suspicious of Archer and unsuccessfully tried to stop him for fear he was an 'accident waiting to happen'.⁵⁸

There is also the useful supporting evidence from Archer's prison diaries of people who had not deserted him. Indeed, the diaries are, notably, dedicated to 'foul-weather friends', clearly implying that the opposite type of friends were not there for him. Furthermore, Archer makes sure he name checks those who stood by him, supported him, or were at least not harshly critical when he was imprisoned: MPs, David Faber, John Gummer, and Peter Lilley; members of the Lords, Bertie Denham and Robin Ferrers; former Prime Minister, John Major; and the former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey.⁵⁹ A list of supporters was even drawn up, with Archer commenting in his prison diaries that this 'news gives me such a lift, and makes me feel guilty that I had ever doubted my friends would stand by me'.⁶⁰ Naturally, the opposite is also important: those-who-betrayed-Archer is another theme in his prison diaries. For instance, when lying on his prison bed, Archer mused:

57. Cf. H. Young, 'Honest John Major landed his party with Lord Archer', *Guardian* (November 23, 1999).

58. The 'accident waiting to happen' is how Willie Whitelaw, the former Conservative Deputy Leader, described Archer in a warning to Margaret Thatcher. The phrase is also the title of Crick's chapter on the topic of Archer, Norris, loyalty, and the race for London Mayor. See Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 422-44.

59. Archer, *Hell*, pp. 62, 92.

60. Archer, *Hell*, p. 92.

I think about the verdict, and the fact that it had never crossed my mind even for a moment that the jury could find Francis innocent and me guilty of the same charge. How could we have conspired if one of us didn't realize a conspiracy was taking place? They also appeared to accept the word of my former secretary, Angie Peppiatt, a woman who stole thousands of pounds from me, while deceiving me and my family for years.⁶¹

Loyalty and betrayal clearly meant a lot to Archer.

While there are some fairly obvious connections between, on the one hand, Peter and the disciples and, on the other, a range of fallible politicians, themes of loyalty and betrayal surround the other major character to get rough representation in *Gospel according to Judas*: an unnamed scribe who (significantly?) becomes the Scribe with a capital 'S'. The Scribe gets riled at being tricked by Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan into having to accept that Samaritans might be good neighbours after all. Judas and the Scribe get to know one another and, while Judas has some reservations about Jesus, all he wanted to do is make sure Jesus was safe and got out of Jerusalem alive. The Scribe agreed but all along he was duping the naïve, well-intentioned Judas into giving away the location of Jesus. Consequently, the Scribe went off to the Sanhedrin and double-crossed Judas (yes, it was someone else's fault!) in order to sort out the finer details of killing Jesus. 'How flattering the press can be when they want something', claimed Archer in his prison diary and in sentiments hardly alien to the role of the Scribe.⁶²

In the climax to the Judas–Scribe subplot, the theme of betrayal reaches its peak, with Judas as the betrayed, innocent victim. Even Judas' kiss that gave Jesus away was more accidental than not. When Judas heard Jesus agonising, he hoped Jesus would leave Jerusalem, and threw his arms around Jesus before kissing him. Then the band of officers appeared and a horrified Judas had realised what he had (accidentally) done.⁶³ And how does the horrified Judas act? He charges at the Scribe with fists and spit flying, screaming about *betrayal*.⁶⁴ Worse still, when people wanted to know who betrayed Jesus, the Scribe steps forward and declares that it is Judas Iscariot.⁶⁵ After this revelation the crowd repeatedly chants that Judas is a 'betrayed' and as Judas pleads with the Scribe to tell the truth the Scribe responds with a smile and repeats the allegation of 'betrayed'. All Judas can now do is weep.

61. Archer, *Hell*, p. 11.

62. Archer, *Purgatory*, p. 222.

63. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, pp. 73–74.

64. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 74.

65. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 77.

This is *the* key narrative device for the shifting of the blame away from Judas in Archer's book. And the choice of a scribe as the arch-betrayer is not accidental. One of Archer's real-life problems has been those modern day scribes – the press and unauthorized biographers – and so it is no surprise that it was a profoundly dishonest *Scribe* who manipulated the innocent and naïve Judas into giving away Jesus to the bad guys. In general terms this has connections with Archer's political life: John Major's Conservative government was notorious for complaining about bad press and campaigning journalists, though this is, of course, a common complaint of any party in power and was at least matched by the New Labour government. As Crick put it:

After the battering that John Major and his party had suffered during the 1990s, there was something of a siege mentality about the party. Weren't the papers and the journalists going after Archer the very same people who had unfairly attacked the Tories in the past? To many activists, public criticism of Archer was just a further example of the way the untrustworthy media had it in for the Conservatives.⁶⁶

But more specifically, and more significantly, Archer had far more personal problems than most with the press.

The British tabloids, for instance, have been crucial in Archer's downfall. It was the *News of the World* which, in 1986, ran the fateful multi-page story on Archer's involvement with, and payment to, Monica Coghlan which was picked up by other newspapers and led to Archer resigning his governmental position. It was the *Daily Star* which went further and implied Archer was involved sexually with Coghlan, prompting Archer to sue. But in another twist to our story, Archer was duped by an elaborate *News of the World* trap involving secret tape-recorders, Coghlan, a London train station, a posse of disguised journalists, and a touch of farce.⁶⁷ Interestingly, Archer, in a statement that might have come from Archer's Judas, admitted to 'lack of judgement' but added, 'foolishly, as I now realise, I allowed myself to fall into what I can only call a trap in which a newspaper, in my view, played a reprehensible part'.⁶⁸

Intriguingly, Archer initially responded to the editor of the *News of the World* with both threats and emotional appeals in last-gasp attempts to prevent the publication of the story in order to save his career. And this was not the first or last time Archer had combined threats and emotion to

66. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 442.

67. For the full story see Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 262-76.

68. S. Trotter, 'Archer claimed he fell into trap over pay-off', *Glasgow Herald* (October 27, 1986); Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 263-64.

journalists.⁶⁹ During the Berkeley affair, John Clare, then of the *Times*, was sent to Louth to investigate the allegations levelled at Archer and grilled him on a train journey to King's Cross. As Clare went through the allegations, Archer did not dispute them and pleaded with Clare not to publish the story claiming it would upset his wife. When that failed, Archer then threatened legal action.⁷⁰

But more specifically, three major journalistic figures were central to Archer's downfall: Paul Foot, Adam Raphael, and Archer's *bête noire*, his biographer Michael Crick.

Adam Raphael, the former political editor of the *Observer*, described himself as belonging to 'a not very select band of journalists who over the years have become obsessed by the fact that such an obvious charlatan should have been allowed to play a prominent role in British public life'. Raphael was forced under subpoena to give evidence for the *Daily Star* in Archer's successful 1987 libel trial but the jury evidently did not believe Raphael's claim that Archer had admitted to him that he had met Coghlan, clean contrary to Archer's claims in court. The result of the 1987 case led Raphael to research the details further, concluding that Archer had 'repeatedly perjured himself throughout the trial' and had conspired to pervert the course of justice. But more crucially for present purpose, Raphael's involvement in the Archer case led to allegations emanating from the Garrick Club that he had 'betrayed Archer'.⁷¹

By the time of the doomed mayoral election bid, Paul Foot had emerged as a prominent journalist investigating Archer's truth claims in the *Daily Mirror* and the *Evening Standard*, as well as in the satirical magazine, *Private Eye*. The *Evening Standard* vigorously opposed Archer's candidacy for the mayoral elections. In reaction, Archer accused the *Evening Standard* of holding a vendetta against him.⁷² In March 1998 when Archer was 3/1 favourite to become mayor of London, Foot wrote a damning article listing issues from Archer's past under the blunt title, 'Why this man is unfit to be mayor'.⁷³ Prior to this Foot had been journalistically involved in various parts of Archer's colourful life:

69. Jury, 'Fall of Jeffrey Archer: The Media'; Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 275-76.

70. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 142.

71. Raphael, 'His Guilt Was Writ Large'. See also Raphael's book on high-profile libel cases with one particular case most prominent: *My Learned Friends: An Insider's View of the Jeffrey Archer Case and Other Notorious Libel Actions* (London: W.H. Allen, 1989).

72. Jury, 'Fall of Jeffrey Archer: The Media'.

73. P. Foot, 'Why this man is unfit to be mayor', *Evening Standard* (March 25, 1998), reprinted in P. Foot, *Articles of Resistance* (London: Bookmarks, 2000), pp. 170-74.

when Archer first stood as an MP Foot was contacted at *Private Eye* by Humphrey Berkeley; when confronted on the missing suits episode in Toronto Archer wrote to Foot ‘confirming’ that the man was not even him; in 1987, while working for the *Daily Mirror*, Foot was sent a document relating to Archer’s shoplifting charges in Toronto with a description closely resembling Archer’s details, right down to his address. On the suits episode, the *Daily Mirror* would not run with the story as Archer had recently won £500,000 compensation from the *Daily Star*, but the story would re-emerge in Crick’s biography. The Crick version stated honest mistakes and confusion (unchallenged by Archer) yet Foot was told by Archer that there was no incident. Foot would print this inconsistency in his *Evening Standard* article challenging Archer’s suitability for London mayor. Archer did respond to allegations made by Foot yet, in classic Archer style, there remained some damaging errors in his response, including citing the bridge in the Toronto store that did not then exist!⁷⁴

Finally, Michael Crick, the political journalist, and arguably *the* ultimate modern-day Scribe in Archer’s life, collected Archer’s lies in well-documented detail in his biography of Archer, and had even written to the Conservative leader at the time of the London mayoral elections, William Hague, warning him that there was more scandal to come.⁷⁵ The Archer–Crick controversy was captured on television for all to see. After Archer was elected Conservative candidate for Mayor of London, just before the next wave of scandal, Crick was prevented from asking questions. Crick recalls the moment he was pushed aside by Archer’s spokesperson, Stephan Shakespeare, before being dragged by the shoulders by Archer’s driver, David Crann. It followed that no questions could be posed by the press to Archer and his beaten opponent Steven Norris, much to the press’s fury.⁷⁶ The investigative documentary programme, *Panorama*, caught Archer on camera angrily criticising Crick and the television portrayal of Archer, accompanied by the ominous threat: ‘You wait till I’m Mayor. You’ll find out how tough I am.’⁷⁷

In the more immediate context of the genesis of the *Gospel according to Judas*, Archer’s dislike of the British press is not difficult to find. In his prison diaries, it should be no surprise that another recurring topic is Archer’s hatred for what he saw as the lies and manipulation of the British press and how they discredited him and others, both throughout

74. See further Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 435.

75. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 431.

76. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, pp. 443–44.

77. ‘Jeffrey Archer: A Life of Lies’.

his life and while he was in prison.⁷⁸ It is significant that Archer's first press interview after his release from prison was with a fellow member of the House of Lords, Roy Hattersley, and here he again betrayed a deep distrust for the press. Hattersley recalled that the interview would bring up painful topics but that Archer accepted this because Hattersley, being a privy councillor, could be trusted!⁷⁹ Even in the publicity accompanying the publication of the *Gospel according to Judas*, Archer could not help but get a dig in at his home press; in one press conference Archer noted that the questions from the floor 'were all serious and considered' but with 'the exception of one English newspaper – it was a delight to hear the groans that followed his question'.⁸⁰

In this light, it is extremely difficult to read the *Gospel according to Judas* with its damning of the manipulative Scribe at the expense of the manipulated Judas and not think of Archer's big problems with the British press, certain campaigning journalists, and his unauthorized biographer.

6. Speculative Archerisms

With there being enough powerful evidence to suggest that the *Gospel according to Judas* has deliberate parallels with Archer's life, it is highly tempting to read such things into other details in the book. We might label these 'speculative' because they are more in the realm of educated guesses and cannot be proven with any degree of certainty. But collectively they start to make this reader at least feel a little suspicious that Archerisms are indeed coming through (consciously or unconsciously) so the argument is worth presenting for others to make their judgments.

Perhaps a hermeneutic of suspicion starts to take over any interpreter of Archer, but is there not a striking parallel in the formatting of the first two title pages? The first title page has *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO* and *BY BENJAMIN ISCARIOT* sandwiching *JUDAS*, with *JUDAS* in a notably larger font and different colour. The format is identical for the second title page. For reasons of greater clarity we may reconstruct and parallel them both in the following way:

78. E.g. Archer, *Hell*, pp. 81, 92, 97, 122-23; Archer, *Purgatory*, pp. 2, 13, 25, 76, 105, 150, 222, 240, 260, 308. Note, however, positive readings of the press when they side with Archer e.g. *Heaven*, pp. 435-36.

79. Hattersley, 'The Big Dipper'.

80. Archer, 'Gospel according to Judas'.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
JUDAS
BY BENJAMIN ISCARIOT

RECOUNTED BY
JEFFREY ARCHER
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF PROFESSOR FRANCIS J. MOLONEY
SDB, AM, STD, DPHIL (OXEN)

Coincidence? I think we should be told, to steal a regular phrase from an old enemy of Archer, *Private Eye*.

Another speculative Archerism is when the *Gospel according to Judas* provides an emphatic nod to the women in Jesus' ministry. These women were loyal to him from the beginning, had scarified everything for him, and given up time and money. And the women listed are: Mary, from the village of Magdala who, it is emphasised, is otherwise known as Mary Magdalene; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward; and a generic and unspecified reference to others dedicated to the cause.⁸¹ Moreover, Judas felt shame when he realised that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the generic other women had remained loyal all along, that the women had wept when Jesus appeared in the square, and that they remained nearby when Jesus was on his way to be crucified and loyally stood by the cross.⁸²

It can only be speculated as to how many readers would have blinked if Archer had inserted 'Mary Weedon from Cheltenham Ladies' College, who came to be known as Mary Archer' or 'Mary the mother of William and James Archer' into these lists. Indeed, Mary Archer is a significant presence in Archer's prison diaries, in ways that clearly carry echoes of the Gospels (biblical and Archerean). Volume 2 (*Purgatory*) has for its epilogue Kipling's 'The Thousandth Man' which, of course, has the theme of rare loyalty, and was dedicated to 'Mary: The thousandth woman'. It is also worth noting Archer's comments at the beginning of his prison diaries: 'I turn and glance at my wife Mary seated at the back of the court, head bowed, ashen-faced, a son on either side to comfort her'.⁸³ Archer's comments on Mary in his first British interview (February 2007) after his release from prison, and just a year before the *Gospel according to Judas* was published, are perhaps more significant still. He praised Mary's 'remarkable stoicism with which she faces everything'.

81. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 26.

82. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, pp. 79-81.

83. Archer, *Hell*, p. 1.

He went on to answer the question of whether his ‘recovery’ would have been impossible or virtually impossible without her:

I often think about that. It’s having a sheer anchor. Someone there who is reliable and solid the whole time... The answer to the question is, of course, I don’t know. But it would certainly have been 10 times as hard.⁸⁴

Similarly, the role of women in general gets highlighted in his prison diaries. The method of doing so may be somewhat clunky and patronising but for these reasons it shows that Archer wanted to highlight the point:

I turn my attention to the letters. Like my life, they are falling into a pattern of their own, some offering condolences on my mother’s death, others kindness and support. Many continue to comment on Mr Justice Potts’s summing-up, and the harshness of the sentence. I am bound to admit they bring back one’s faith in one’s fellow men...and women.⁸⁵

Finally, Archer once had clear ambitions to be leader of the Conservative Party and has regularly seen himself as a figure of some importance, though he is hardly the only individual analysed in this book who might be deemed to hold a Messiah Complex. With typical Archerean flourish, the book launch for the *Gospel according to Judas* included a press conference chaired by the head of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and located at Westminster Cathedral, London.⁸⁶ Archer also enlisted the help of his collaborator Francis Moloney, himself an internationally recognised Catholic scholar with links to the Vatican. Hyperbole aside, Ann Widdecombe had a point when she says ‘he doesn’t bother with the local priest, but goes to the Vatican and one of the greatest living scriptural scholars’.⁸⁷ Equally spectacular is that a figure no less than Archbishop Desmond Tutu, apparently Archer’s first choice,⁸⁸ narrated the audio version of *Gospel according to Judas*! Examples of Archer’s interest in the grandeur of Archer are not difficult to find. For instance, Archer did not hide his light in presenting his relationship with

84. Hattersley, ‘The Big Dipper’.

85. Archer, *Hell*, p. 87 (elliptical dots original). Also worth mentioning is the art-imitating-life example of the importance of Benjamin as a loyal son in *Gospel according to Judas* and the theme of the loyalty of Archer’s real-life sons in his prison diaries (e.g. Archer, *Hell*, pp. 10-11).

86. J. Hooper, ‘Archer attempts to rehabilitate Judas’, *Guardian* (March 21, 2007); Gledhill, ‘Gospel of Jeffrey Archer’.

87. Widdecombe, ‘Can a Reputation Be Rescued?’

88. J. Archer on his ‘official’ blog: <http://jeffreycharchers.blogspot.com/2007/03/voice-of-archbishop-desmond-tutu.html>.

‘my Kurds’. Crick reported: ‘But yet again Archer couldn’t help adopting the air of an imperial governor. “My Kurds”, he would describe them to accompanying reporters; and to the Kurds the press were “my senior journalists”.’ And on his clear popularity among Kurds, Archer would say ‘See how they love me’.⁸⁹ So what else might this background tell us about the self-identity of Judas/Archer in the *Gospel according to Judas*? Obviously, there is a lack of self-doubt but in terms of precise detail the following speculative connection (and note the eerily similar verses) is too difficult to resist as it would appear to imply that we put Judas (and therefore Archer) in an even greater light:

Jesus wept (John 11.35)

Judas wept (*Judas* 22.35)

Archer couldn’t be implying...could he?⁹⁰

7. Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less

While the use of Judas in art, film, and literature may provide an implicit criticism of traditional Christian readings, this invariably results in a reworking of Christian myths and ideals in order to give them contemporary relevance. Richard Walsh, for instance, argued that the greedy Judas is excluded or removed from American Jesus films in part because he ‘raises uncomfortable questions for capitalist Americans and is more likely to turn up in Marxist or anti-consumption Judas films’, thereby allowing audiences to remain ‘comfy Christian capitalists’.⁹¹ Archer himself would not be immune to such difficulties; he became very rich, has an entrepreneurial background, is a self-confessed ‘free enterprise merchant’,⁹² and he was close ideologically and personally to Thatcher,

89. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 381.

90. To add to the motley crew of anti-Archer readings online, even the conspiracy theorist end of blogging can note the obvious connection between the biblical verse and *Gospel according to Judas*. See N. Godfrey, ‘Gospel of Judas (Archer/Moloney) fantasy verses’, *Vridar* (September 4, 2007), <http://vridar.wordpress.com/2007/04/09/gospel-of-judas-archermoloney-fantasy-verses/#more-263>.

91. Walsh, ‘Gospel according to Judas’, pp. 44, 46. We might add that Walsh pointed out that (pre-Patriot Act) nationalist-revolutionary Judases can redirect questions away from consumer capitalism towards other political questions, thereby resonating with Zionist and ideals of freedom. While Walsh’s focus was mainly on American films, this could be one (conscious or unconscious) influence on Archer’s choice of a nationalist-revolutionary Jesus.

92. Archer, *Hell*, p. 149.

all issues which come through in his novels.⁹³ However, rather than ignore questions implicitly challenging the tenets of capitalism, Archer's Judas tackles them head-on. The *Gospel according to Judas* shows the problems Judas had with the story of the rich young man and in particular Jesus' command for the rich man to sell all he had and give it to the poor in order to buy treasure in heaven.⁹⁴ For Judas, Jesus could not function as a king overthrowing the Romans while a wandering prophet but, worse still, this was out-of-step with what are described as Israel's greatest traditions of measuring God's glory through wealth and national success. Judas then proceeds to quote Psalm 72.15-17, and a Solomonic tribute to the material blessings of a 'great king'.⁹⁵ In other words, and in a move carried out by other political figures covered in this book, one aspect of the Bible is used to trump another deemed problematic. This section ends by Archer's rich young man responding simply, warning them that they follow a dangerous man who will lead to the fall of many in Israel (Luke 2.34), a view later accepted by Judas.⁹⁶ Notably, the Gospel reason that the money could be used for the poor (Mark 10.21) gets dropped in the *Gospel according to Judas*. While capitalist popular culture may well have absorbed anti-capitalist critique,⁹⁷ we can always rely on Archer, and his exegesis, to come to the defence of the capitalist system that has ultimately rescued him from all the betrayals and personal financial disasters.

Archer's exegetical support for the joys of material blessings is not one that carries much clout in a post-2008 political climate where austerity and hostility to corporate avarice and greedy bankers is prominent. Unlike our next heir-to-Thatcher, Tony Blair, and the Thatcherite heirs-to-Blair, Michael Gove and David Cameron, Archer's take on Thatcher's Bible is *too* greed-is-good, *too* attached to an electorally toxic brand of Thatcherism and Conservatism, *too* close to the idiosyncratic Jeffrey Archer, and *too* far removed from an exegetical tradition with cultural credibility to be deemed successful in terms of party political influence. Unlike that presented by Gove and Cameron (see Chapter 9), the nationalism presented by the *Gospel according to Judas* is that of a

93. Foot, 'Why this man is unfit to be mayor', p. 172.

94. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 46.

95. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 47.

96. Archer, *Gospel according to Judas*, p. 55.

97. S. Žižek, 'Return of the Natives', *New Statesman* (March 4, 2010); M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009); C. Cremin, *Capitalism's New Clothes: Enterprise, Ethics and Enjoyment in Times of Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).

revolution for Israel, and material blessings are Judas-themes that have resonated more in America than in a nation where, despite the best efforts of Christopher Hill, revolution is often deemed to have been something that foreigners have done and do. After all, is Cromwell not ambiguously celebrated and commonly known as a Christmas-banning killjoy? But amidst all this, is there not a heart-warming story about a Bible-inspired rehabilitation of a disgraced politician? Should we not end with a rousing moralistic finale on the importance of giving someone a second chance? Probably not; for in one sense, this curious variant of the Neoliberal Bible *is* the ultimate hyper-Thatcherite success story of an ambitious individual who has picked himself up again and again. There is no moral to this latest episode in Archer's colourful life, other than that crime probably pays. Archer will sell more books, make more TV appearances, rake in more filthy lucre, and possibly even get himself involved in another reinvigorating scandal. But did you really expect *piety* when the main argument here has shown that a rowdy mob of trolls, bloggers, hacks, and television-friendly politicians were right all along?