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Judas: not such a bad guy after all;
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Jeffrey Archer launched his new book, 'The Gospel According to Judas', in Rome this week. But as Peter Stanford points out, Archer isn't the first to be intrigued by the gaps in the official story

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Judas Iscariot has been intriguing and dividing writers for almost 2,000 years. The four gospel scribes were the first to comment on the apostle whose name usually comes at the end of the roll call of Jesus's inner circle. Matthew portrayed him as a man willing to betray his master with a kiss for 30 pieces of silver, Luke presented him as possessed by Satan, while John gave him a father, Simon, and a role, as treasurer of the Jesus movement.

Each detail was a small but significant embellishment on what would otherwise simply be (like more than half of the other apostles) a name on a list. It started the process by which Judas has become one of the most instantly identifiable characters in Christianity and beyond, the personification of wickedness and the original fifth columnist.

This week that enduring fascination took a fresh turn with the publication of Jeffrey Archer's book, *The Gospel According to Judas* (Macmillan £9.99). He enlisted as his unlikely co-author Professor Francis Moloney, a distinguished Catholic theologian, papal adviser and priest. The launch of the book took place in Rome, God's business address on earth. Hovering over the launch was the question of why a man who has, over the years, been accused of betraying his wife, his party and his own past, should now so publicly want to rehabilitate the ultimate betrayer.

In fact, Archer does little more than tread a well-worn road in painting Judas as more scapegoat than betrayer, blamed for Jesus's death when he was in reality just a pawn in a bigger game. The most recent pilgrim to have walked along this same path was the New Zealand poet and novelist, C K Stead in *My Name Was Judas* (Harvill Secker £16.99). Like Archer, he presents us with an ageing Judas, rejecting tales that he hanged himself from a tree as tittle-tattle, and providing an alternative perspective on the Jesus mission.

What hooked Stead on Judas, he has said, was the potential he gave him as a writer to inhabit "a sceptical voice standing out against the building of new orthodoxies". So Jesus's miracles, for instance, are debunked by Stead's Judas. Lazarus was really just a bed-ridden weakling who needed a kick up the backside to get him out from under the duvet.

Judas, the insider who was also the outsider, provides rich pickings for those wanting to debunk the claims of Christianity. The subtext of both Archer's and Stead's accounts is that Jesus wasn't all he's made out to be, that Judas alone saw through him, and that it was this, not the betrayal, that has made him a hate figure in Christianity ever since.

Interest in Judas has been sustained by one of those wonderful historical what ifs. What if Judas wrote his own gospel to counterbalance Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, a text that was then lost for centuries but which suddenly re-emerged? Simon Mawer turned this teaser into a well-received historical thriller in 2000 with *The Gospel of Judas* (Abacus), while Michael Dickinson's *The Lost Testament of Judas Iscariot* (Brandon, 1994) made an excursion into the same territory, allowing his hero to elope post-betrayal with Martha, Lazarus's downtrodden sister.

Fictional speculations like these should have ended with the publication last year by the American National Geographic Society of the real thing. In the 1970s, a copy of The Gospel of Judas, translated into Coptic from its original second-century Greek, had been unearthed at Al Minya in Egypt. It took 30 years for it to emerge from the shadows into print, but when it did, it presented Judas's betrayal as unequivocally part of the divine plan. For Jesus to rise from the dead, it suggested, he had first to die and, by enabling that to happen, Judas was therefore doing God's work.

But The Gospel of Judas has not proved the last word, as Archer's book flamboyantly demonstrates. One problem is that the rediscovered manuscript dates back only as far as 150-180AD. Was this a later edition of an earlier text in which Judas had told "my own story", or was it simply part of the Apocrypha, the writings about Jesus from the first and second centuries which didn't make the cut for the New Testament? A publishing cottage industry is now growing to pick over such questions. There is Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the shaping of Christianity by Elaine Pagels and Karen King (Allen Lane £16.99), a scholarly analysis by internationally renowned professors from Harvard and Princeton. Somewhat lighter and more polemical in tone is The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed by Bart Ehrman (Oxford £12.99).

Both books struggle with the Judas who emerges from the lost manuscript - angry, homophobic and anti-Semitic. Yet one of Judas's assumed identities over the centuries, especially in Christian-inspired literature, has been as the archetypal Jew. In medieval times, in particular, Judas the Jew was regularly portrayed as sinking to new depths of depravity as a way of reinforcing and justifying Christianity's witch-hunt of Jews in Europe. So, in the 13th century, in The Golden Legend the Dominican priest, Jacob of Verragino, gave Judas a chilling fictional back story as a serial murderer whose victims include his father, killed so that Judas can have sex with his mother.

The link between the wicked Judas and anti-Semitism has more recent form too, as the Jewish historian Hyam Maccoby demonstrated in his 1992 book, Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil. Among Nazi propaganda from the 1930s are depictions of Judas as a sinister Jewish figure. It was Maccoby's book that inspired novelist Howard Jacobson's 1993 film, Sorry, Judas, a debate between 12 theologians staged round the Last Supper table.

Judas's supposed collusion with dark forces, prompted above all by his image, second only to the Devil, as the Bad Boy of the New Testament, has also made him popular in the horror and science fiction genres. In the 19th century, the celebrated French adventure writer, Paul Feval, portrayed Baron Iscariot as one of the two rulers of an evil kingdom in La Vampire. And in our own times, the American sci-fi writer, George R R Martin, author of the best-selling Song of Ice and Fire series, has published a short story, "The Way of Cross and Dragon", that describes a secret religious sect who meet to worship Saint Judas in pseudo-Satanic rituals.

Biblical characters offer an odd combination of instant name-recognition, archetypal significance but inadequately fleshed-out personal stories. Like the "whore" Mary Magdalene, that other fashionable (thanks to Dan Brown) bit-part player in the New Testament drama, Judas "the betrayer" seems set to enthrall long after his entanglement with Jeffrey Archer is forgotten.