CrossMark

WHAT SHOULD JUDAS HAVE DONE? AND WHAT SHOULD JESUS?

Ardon Lyon

The gospels tell us that Judas betrayed Jesus, and that this was an incredibly wicked act. Lots of people believe that at least many of the events portrayed in the New Testament did not actually happen. I argue here that if we suppose on the contrary that they did, then Judas did not in fact act wickedly, and that the only person who acted immorally in this situation was Jesus. I refer in this article first to the wonderful story 'Three Versions of Judas' by Borges, who draws a somewhat different conclusion from mine, and later to Amos Oz's novel Judas.

I

According to the Christian story, Judas was the most evil man who ever lived. His allegedly terrible deed is recorded in magnificent paintings and other works of art, such as Michelangelo's *Last Supper*, and Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. He has been considered more evil than figures such as Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin or Mao, who were responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent human beings. For the one person whose death Judas was responsible for was apparently more precious than all those humans put together, for he was the one and only Son of God – or arguably, according to later Christian theology, was somehow even God Himself – the Word made Flesh.

Several scholars have argued that the story of Judas as told in the gospels is completely implausible. I shall

doi:10.1017/S1477175618000106 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2018
Think 49, Vol. 17 (Summer 2018)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175618000106 Published online by Cambridge University Press

assume, however, that it is true, but will argue nevertheless that if it is, then we should conclude from it not that Judas was evil but that on the contrary he was utterly heroic. The suggestions that the gospel stories are, at least in their main points, untrue, are anyway not very convincing if we leave out the stories about miracles. The unconvincing suggestions are as follows. First, it has been claimed that even according to the gospels Judas was rather a wealthy man, and since he was a disciple who certainly loved Jesus he would hardly have betrayed him for the measly sum of only thirty pieces of silver. Secondly, Jesus was extremely well known, having publicly preached to thousands of people and performed many wonderful miracles, including the useful ability of turning water into wine, having caused problems in the Temple, etc. So the soldiers and agents of the High Priests who came to arrest him would have known who he was, and would easily have recognized him.

Neither of those arguments seems to me very strong. First, even if Judas was wealthy, he might have been greedy enough to want this relatively small sum, although how he could have been so grasping and yet a disciple is a bit of a mystery. Secondly, even if Jesus was well known to the general public, he might not have been easily recognized by the Roman soldiers who came to arrest him, or even by the accompanying High Priests' agents, since he was one of a group of several swarthy bearded men of Middle Eastern origin. So in considering Judas's morality I shall assume that the *facts* of the case as told in the Bible are what we strangely call 'gospel truth', i.e. what is normally taken not to mean 'almost certainly false', but definitely true.

In his extraordinarily fine short story 'Three Versions of Judas', the great writer Jorge Luis Borges[1] discusses an alleged 1909 work *Kristus och Judas* by a Swedish cleric, Nils Runeberg of Lund. There were actually many people called Runeberg who lived in Lund, several of them ordained, and Borges refers to a later magnum opus by Nils, *Den hemlige Fralsaren*, which Borges writes was

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translated into German in 1912 by Emil Schering. As so often with the incredibly learned Borges it is difficult to know at first what is true and what is fictional in his work, particularly in this case since the real Emil Schering certainly did know Swedish, for he translated works by Strindberg. It seems, however, that *Kristus och Judas* does not exist, and the wonderful ideas discussed in it were created in Borges's fantastic imagination.

According to Borges's story, Runeberg believed that Judas made 'a sacrifice of equal worth'[2] to that of Jesus and God. The (presumably fictitious) Runeberg stated that at first Judas's action seems superfluous, for reasons explained above, in particular that Jesus was extremely well known. But 'to assume an error in the Scriptures is intolerable' – something which Borges obviously did not believe – so in truth it was required that a man 'make a sacrifice of equal worth' to that of Jesus. For this person would thereafter 'dwell amid inextinguishable flames' forever. The man chosen by God to make this extraordinary sacrifice was Judas: it could have been anyone else. Judas therefore 'renounced honour, goodness, peace, the kingdom of heaven, as others, less heroically, renounce pleasure. ... He thought that happiness, like goodness, is a divine attribute, which should not be usurped by men.' Borges goes on to describe arguments against Runeberg's views allegedly put forward by learned clerics. His whole story is extremely short and is extraordinarily well worth reading.

What I want to argue here, however, is a different view, namely, that even if the story as told in the gospels is completely true, nevertheless what Judas did was not evil at all and deserving of punishment (and hence paradoxically extremely good according to Borges) but, on the contrary, was anyway extremely good in itself. The argument is simple. If Judas hadn't betrayed Jesus then presumably Jesus wouldn't have been crucified, and *Christianity would not have existed.* And the existence of Christianity is presumably thought, at least by Christians, to be a wonderfully

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good thing. So, what Judas did is deserving of the utmost praise.

Now it might be argued that if Judas hadn't betrayed Jesus then he would anyway have been crucified later. Well, perhaps he would and perhaps he wouldn't: who knows? Perhaps he would have been betrayed by someone else, who also should not be blamed if that was the only way to bring about Christianity, or perhaps betrayal would not have been needed. In any event, if Jesus had been crucified later anyway, even without Judas's intervention, we should hardly blame Judas for having brought it about somewhat earlier. Or perhaps a form of Christianity might have been formed, worshipping Jesus, even if he hadn't been crucified by the Romans: but such a form presumably would be very different from the Christianity which actually occurred, and would not have had a cross as its symbol.

What is even worse is that according to the gospels Jesus actually told Judas that he would betray him, and told him in an extremely underhand manner, but which would easily be understood. For according to St John's Gospel 13, verses 18–30, at the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples: 'I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me.'[3] One might wonder why Jesus said here, and several times elsewhere, 'I tell you the truth . . .', as though sometimes he didn't, and in any event, why should his saying that what he said was true lead them to believe him any more strongly than if he hadn't added this epithet? It is to be hoped this is not an early version of the absurd philosophical theory of the redundancy account of truth, based on the correct point that *saying* that what you say is true asserts nothing more than simply saying it without this useless addition. (Saying that what you say is true does not of course make it true, and on the contrary, leads the hearer reasonably to expect the addition 'On the other hand . . .', making the point that this truth is either irrelevant to, or not very good evidence for, what is being proved.)

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Be that as it may, one can well imagine the disciples thinking to themselves 'Surely not. None of us would do such a terrible thing (except by mistake!).' For they 'stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant ... [and when asked, Jesus answered] ... "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." ... Then ... he gave it to Judas ... As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.'[4]

Either the remark about Satan is meant literally, or it is not. So, we can ask whether it is being asserted that a wicked Archangel did literally 'enter him', and took *control* of what he thought and did, in which case Judas himself surely should not be blamed for anything while Satan was still 'in him'. If, however, to say that Satan entered into him is simply to say that the thought occurred to him, as though someone metaphorically whispered in his ear, then Judas still had the power either to follow this bidding, or to reject it. But perhaps the passage just means that at that point Judas became very wicked. But did he?

Presumably he could either have done what Jesus told him he would do, or he could have rejected it. Well, what should he have done? To reject it, and not betray him, would have been to disobey the one of whom Judas was a disciple, and surely, he would think, he should not do that. So, it seems clear to me that on this account Judas didn't do anything wrong at all, even leaving aside the question whether without this betrayal there would have been no Christianity.

It is often stated that we should anyway realize that we ought not to do unthinkingly just whatever a leader tells us to do, right or wrong, believing that what a leader tells us *must* be right, even if it doesn't seem right to us. For however good and wonderful we believe our leader to be, each of us has to judge the leader's wisdom and moral goodness, and thus when he or she commands something, think about what is right, and then do just *that.* This is correct, but it is true about everything. If an expert in the aesthetic valuation of paintings or music informs me that a

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particular work is good, and it does not seem so to me, I may reasonably conclude it is likely that I am wrong in my judgement. The same holds if I am so informed about anything non-evaluative, for example a scientific or mathematical matter. If, however a leader tells us to do something which we think is *overwhelmingly* wicked, such as murdering members of another religion or making them sex slaves just because they hold that religious belief and not for any other reason, or that we should make a burnt offering sacrifice of our son or daughter, then we surely ought to reject that command and accept the consequences.

In any event, Jesus surely did not here do what is morally right. If, for some incomprehensible reason, he had to tell Judas that he would betray him, he could have said it outright, face to face, instead of in such a pusillanimous fashion. Jesus presumably wanted his action to be understood by everyone present, and presumably it was. But if Jesus knew, perhaps because it was all part of God's plan, that he was going to be betrayed, arrested and crucified, then why on earth did he say to Judas that he was going to betray him, since allegedly he anyway knew that this was going to happen? It seems clear that this was a completely unnecessary and disgraceful thing that Jesus did. It should be remembered that I am not here considering that what is claimed in the accepted gospels may be untrue, as for example suggested in the recently discovered Gospel according to Judas. I am arguing that if the claims are true, then incorrect moral conclusions have been drawn from them.

II

In this short section I shall not be considering the question whether Judas did anything wrong, but instead the question what we should conclude from the specific wording used in various passages in the gospels describing Jesus's arrest and crucifixion.

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There is something deeply worrying about these passages. Soon after the bread-giving, and just before (also disgracefully) telling Peter that he would disown him – which seems a reasonable thing for Peter to have done, since otherwise he too would have betrayed him – Jesus allegedly said to his disciples that 'just as I told the Jews ... where I am going you cannot come'. Now it is surely implausible that Jesus, a Jew, with disciples all of whom were also Jews, would have referred to other Jews as 'the Jews', as though they themselves were not Jewish. There are other examples of this in the New Testament, for instance informing us that 'the Jews' would not accept Jesus's divinity even though he allegedly performed lots of wonderful miracles. The current Pope has kindly informed us that the New Testament is not anti-Semitic, but it is not surprising that other mere mortals, such as Luther, have taken it to be so, given statements such as those quoted above. (I am using the term 'anti-Semitic' not in its literal sense of meaning 'disapproving of Semites', but as used in common parlance to mean 'disapproving of Jews'.)

In order to evaluate the reasonableness of the Pope's conclusion, compare it with the following. Suppose that a group of British as opposed to foreign conspirators refer to those of whom they disapprove as 'the British', rather than 'the (British) government', 'the (British) unions', or whomever else they blamed. They might refer disapprovingly to *past* behaviour of 'the British' (when either they were more appalling than now, or they had presumably been confused by corrupt bosses, the stupid proletariat, Brexiteers, Remainers, or whomever), but they would not refer to current blameworthy behaviour as carried out by 'the British' as though they were not British themselves, except, I think, in the following circumstances. They might have become so disillusioned with the behaviour of British people *in general* that they refer to them disapprovingly in comparison with the charming Italians, intelligent and fiery Venezuelans, or whomever. Then, surely, it would be correct to conclude that they disapproved of the (current) British. So the wording

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used in the gospels that I quoted above surely expresses a disapproval of Jews in general.

Other descriptions in the gospels make it absolutely clear that the gospel writers did of course realize that Jesus was a Jew, and an observant one. In those times, although not of course now, or indeed since the destruction of the Jewish Temple in AD 70, religious Jews carried out animal sacrifices. We are told in Luke 2:24 that just before Passover Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and sacrificed two doves to God, as had his parents soon after he was born: wealthier people were supposed to sacrifice a lamb. It is true that we are also told that Jesus had previously turned over the tables of the money-lenders in the Temple, although we are not told how this demonstrated his love for his enemies, which he also preached. But instead of sacrificing two doves I believe it would have been better if he had given one of his moving and wonderful sermons, pointing out that a good god would not want animal sacrifices made to him. Various Christian apologists have tried to explain why his sacrificing doves was perfectly acceptable, either because symbolic of something or other, or even because it was customary at the time. Tell that to the birds.

It is impossible to over-emphasize the horrors that have followed from drawing the wrong moral conclusions from the factual statements in these gospels, whether or not these factual claims are true. Judas is portrayed as a money-grubbing and evil person, instead of a hero, and he has also been thought of as typical of Jews. It is not surprising that these writings, as well as past condemnation of money-lending by Christians, have led to 2,000 years of anti-Semitism. During this period members of all western religions have anyway fought, murdered and tortured each other, as have sects within these religions – Catholic and Protestant, Sunni and Shia, etc. As I write, the latest example is the slaughter of Rohingya Muslims, allegedly on behalf of peace-loving Myanmar (Burmese) Buddhists.

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No present-day pope would declare the New Testament to be anti-Semitic, because popes find it difficult to assert that any part of the Holy Bible, allegedly the Word of God given to man, is either immoral or factually mistaken – except for the parts known obviously to be false on other grounds – even though it contains hundreds of immoral declarations and factual absurdities, particularly in the Old Testament. And current popes think it is immoral to be anti-Semitic.

In 1965 there was a papal declaration that Jews *as a whole* should not be blamed for the death of Jesus either at the time or thereafter (i.e. only *some* Jews at the time of the crucifixion should be), and in 2011 Benedict XVI 'exonerated' Jews for his death. (Actually, there are two rather obvious reasons why *nobody* can commit deicide against the Christian God.) I understand furthermore that nobody has ever accused Italians, or even Romans, of this terrible crime, nor any pope 'exonerated' them, even though it was Romans, not Jews, who crucified Jesus.

So, what is the explanation of this surely anti-Semitic language in the gospels? I make here a suggestion, although I do not know whether it is correct, or whether it has already been put forwards by others. All of the first Christians were Jews. But by the time the gospels were produced, after St Paul's revelation, their writers would have wanted to argue that people didn't need to be Jewish in order to be Christians. This might explain why they strangely describe Jesus as speaking of 'the Jews', as thought they were 'others', and as he might have spoken of 'the Babylonians', or 'the Egyptians', while at the same time clearly indicating that he was of course Jewish. This language makes it look as though he was anti-Jewish, which if anything is to be believed in the gospels is obviously absurd. For these parts of the gospels portray him as believing that some Jews behaved badly, some well, and some a little of each, as he believed of all other groups. If the explanation I have suggested is correct, then it is to be hoped that the anti-Semitic overtones were unconscious.

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III

I wrote above that 'for some incomprehensible reason' Jesus informed Judas that he would betray him. For the fact is, Jesus could anyway just have given himself up to the Roman authorities who had conquered Israel and Judaea, and said 'Here I am. Do with me whatever you will'. But instead he allegedly went through all this paraphernalia, and then went with his disciples to an olive grove across the Kidron valley (John 18:1). According to John 18:2, Judas 'knew this place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples'. Amazingly, Judas led a group of Roman soldiers and Jewish officials from the chief priests and Pharisees to that very spot at just the right time, and when they asked for Jesus the latter said, 'I am he', at which they 'drew back and fell to the ground' (verse 6). Again, Jesus asked them whom they wanted, and they replied, presumably still lying on the ground, 'Jesus of Nazareth' (verse 7).

The gospel story is well known – indeed it is a central point in the story – that when Jesus was brought before the Roman governor Pilate the latter concluded that he could not find that Jesus had done anything wrong. Even this is implausible, for he had said that Jesus claimed to be the King of the Jews, whereas the only kings of the Jews acceptable to the Romans at that time would be either their Emperor in Rome or their client king Herod as ruler of Judaea. In any event, according to all four gospels Pilate said he would release one prisoner from the death sentence, as was customary at Passover. In John 18:38–40 it is stated that Pilate asked 'the Jews' – without saying who they were – whom he should give up, and they shouted 'Give us Barabbas', of whom it is stated merely that he had 'taken part in a rebellion', although other translations of the phrase call him a 'bandit', while other gospels refer to him as a 'notorious prisoner' or 'involved in a riot'. Apparently, Barabbas was in fact the leader of an uprising against the Romans, and if this is correct then it seems completely reasonable, faced with these distressing alternatives, for a

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group of Jews to ask for his release rather than that of Jesus, since they would have thought that Barabbas, and certainly not Jesus, might have led them to freedom from the Roman yoke. According to Wikipedia, however, there is no mention anywhere else of Romans releasing prisoners at any festival whatsoever. If therefore this Wikipedia claim is correct then this extremely central, indeed notorious, part of the gospel story also is completely untrue, in which case the Jews who allegedly responded to Pilate in the manner described could not possibly have done anything wrong however they reportedly replied, since no such response occurred. There might also have been some confusion over the fact that, apparently, Barabbas's first name was also Jesus.

But presumably Jesus was indeed crucified, and if he hadn't been there would have been no Christianity, while Christianity is thought (at least by Christians) to be a good thing, and this was all part of God's inscrutable plan. So, it is difficult to see why on this view those who brought about his crucifixion did anything wicked. Later Christian dogma declared that Jesus was in some sense identical with God, or 'of the same substance', whereas Jesus himself pretty clearly didn't think he *was* the same person as God, if only because at no point did he claim to be, and allegedly he called out on the Cross to God to ask him why he had betrayed him, and obviously, he didn't think he was talking to himself. It is true he did allegedly make such gnomic utterances as 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9), and also claimed, utterly immorally I think, that 'No-one comes to the Father except through me' (ibid. 14:6). If this is true then it is tough luck on anyone who thinks that Christianity is polytheistic, and worse still for anyone who has never even heard of him.

Unfortunately, the gospels are not very reliable, since they were not written until at least fifty years after Jesus died. They are, however, presumably more reliable than accepted accounts of the life of Muhammad, which did not appear until nearly two hundred years after his death.[5] At

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one time there was a collection of no fewer than 600,000 supposed sayings, or *hadiths*, of the Prophet, which were reduced by al-Bukhari to 7,225, while the great scholar Ibn Hisham stated that 'Much that previous generations had recorded of the Prophet was either bogus, or irrelevant, or sacrilegious.'

If my argument is correct, then what should be our attitude towards the wonderful works of art, music, churches and cathedrals, etc., that have been built in honour of Christianity, and which apparently would not exist without Judas's betrayal? I take it that our attitude should be the same as we have to great artistic works produced by other civilizations. To take something close to our own ways of thinking, it is not difficult to admire ancient Greek sculptures of their gods without believing in their gods. Furthermore, there is (usually) nothing intrinsically immoral about having religious beliefs so long as the holders do not thereby attempt to impose them on others either within or outside that religious group, or behave badly towards others on religious grounds. It may not be very intelligent to have those beliefs, but it isn't immoral – unless it leads one to believe that those others are inferior beings in non-intellectual ways. I cannot help thinking, however, of the words of the great literary critic F. R. Leavis in lectures about the British Romantic poets (about whom he was, I think, often rather too critical), in which he said of them that they tended to 'Switch on emotion, switch off intellect.' I was fortunate to have been able to attend the great man's lectures while I was a student – although unfortunate to be old enough to have done so.

I have argued earlier in this journal that it is immoral to pray to a good God to do something that he would not otherwise do.[6] It isn't immoral to pray in the sense of *giving thanks* to an alleged creator of the universe, if you think he has made such a great fist of it.[7] And we certainly can and should be grateful for the existence of great human creations made in the name of God or gods (even though deploring the frequently appalling treatment of people forced to create them), while it is shocking that even to this day

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human beings destroy artefacts of other religions, and brutally maim, torture and kill people of other religions who have done them no harm, all in the name of religion. Christians certainly have not historically been immune to such behaviour.

Since writing the above, I have read Nicholas de Lange's English translation of Amos Oz's novel *Judas*.[8] It has some very interesting ideas about the Bible story and is fascinating about early arguments by Jewish Israelis concerning the foundation of the State of Israel.

Like Borges, Oz suggests that Judas was the only disciple to have thought that Jesus was divine. He points out that since Jesus allegedly raised people from the dead, it was surely reasonable for Judas to think Jesus would be able to escape death while on the cross, and would step down from it to lead people into a world of peace and harmony. When Jesus failed to do so, Judas hanged himself – not because he felt agonized for 'betraying' him for thirty pieces of silver, as the gospels allege, but because contrary to Judas's expectations, Jesus died. Oz also points out, as had I, that according to the gospel account if Judas had not betrayed Jesus then there would presumably have been no Christianity, but unlike Borges, Oz claims this did not cause Judas to take all the wickedness of the world upon his shoulders and thus paradoxically through this become exceedingly good, but on the contrary straightforwardly to have been a great hero, as I have suggested. Of course, this assumes that the existence of Christianity is a good, even though members of all the monotheistic religions have fought each other, and in the case of Christianity and Islam have even mutilated, tortured and murdered members of alternative sects within their own religions. Oz also thinks, as have others, that it is utterly implausible that the only wealthy disciple would have betrayed Jesus for such a small sum, which he twice points out would only have been sufficient to buy a rather indifferent slave – although why Oz provides such a strange account of the present-day financial value of this sum is not explained.

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Actually, there is a rather plausible explanation why the small sum of thirty pieces of silver was mentioned. I came to this conclusion from my friend David Hindmarsh pointing out to me that it has been *im*plausibly claimed that passages in the Old Testament actually predict that the messiah would be betrayed by a close friend, and for thirty pieces of silver. There are two such passages in the Old Testament which have given rise to this absurd conclusion. The first is in Psalm 41:9, in which King David laments that his close friend (Achithophel) had betrayed him; but there is absolutely no prediction that anyone else will be so betrayed – although of course they will be – let alone the messiah. The second is in Zechariah 11:12–13, in which the prophet breaks with his flock, for which they gave him 'pay' of thirty pieces of silver, which he threw to a potter. Again, there is no prediction that the messiah's betrayer or anyone else will be given this paltry sum. So, we can either assume that Zechariah forgot to mention this important fact, or conclude that over a period of about five hundred years this sum became part of Jewish folklore. Anyone who accepts the first alternative rather than the second would think that Dan Brown is an Albert Einstein.

In any event, my claim is that if what the gospels state happened between Jesus and Judas really did happen – which is contentious – then Judas did not do anything wrong in handing him over to the Romans, and it is appalling that he has historically been portrayed as a villain, not a hero, with disastrous consequences, while Jesus himself certainly did not behave impeccably.

My grateful thanks go to Peter Cave for patiently reading through, pointing out mistakes, and otherwise greatly improving several earlier versions of this article.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175618000106 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

[1] See Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998).

[2] Ibid. 164.

[3] The translation I am relying on is that of The Gideon Bible, 1986 edition, first copyright 1973. The Preface states that it is 'a completely new translation made by over a hundred scholars working directly from the best Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts'. The quotation above is from verse 21.

[4] Ibid., verses 22–6.

[5] See Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword* (London: Abacus paperback, 2013), 42, and for the following two assertions pp. 38 and 45 respectively. Originally published in Great Britain by Little, Brown, 2012.

[6] Ardon Lyon, 'The Immorality of Prayer', *Think* 14/40(2015), 57–64.

[7] But see also Stephen M. Cahn, 'Why Worship God?', *Think* 16.46 (2017), 9–17, in which he points out that from the fact that one should be grateful to someone for providing wonderful things it doesn't follow that one should worship the provider.

[8] Amos Oz, *Judas* (London: Vintage/Penguin paperback 1917), translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange in 2016; first published 2014, Keter Publishing House, Israel.

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