

## Passover 2014

The *History Channel* was running the show of its career. It involved a learned discussion about a tremendous find that would occupy the next three hours. All other programs had been scratched from the schedule. A world-famous expert on biblical affairs, Dr. Iosef Donner, professor emeritus from Israel's Bar Ilan University, was the moderator who would provide commentary about the scenes being sketched out.

The Nielson ratings were going right through the roof. Never in the history of television had a single program been watched by more people around the world. Even the Super Bowl was a piker compared to what was being presented this evening. To ensure these ratings remained sky-high, all advertising was eliminated. It was a tax-free extravaganza for viewers tonight!

Dr. Donner was in rare form, and well he should be. His work on this subject would ensure him the Nobel Prize at the very least. Consequently, he took his time as he deliberated carefully on the most engrossing topic of the last 2,100 years. In fact, his topic had been a principle topic of these past twenty-one centuries, and he was fully intent on impressing his viewers with this fact.

(DIRECTOR): OPENING SCENE SLOWLY FOCUSSES ON A MAN HUNCHED OVER A TABLE BEFORE A FLICKERING LAMP OF ANIMAL FAT. HE IS WRITING WITH A QUILL IN THE RIGHT TO LEFT PENMANSHIP OF THE ARAMAIC ALPHABET. HIS VOICE IS A MUMBLE OF THE WORDS BEING INKED ON THE PARCHMENT BEFORE HIM.

"I, Judas Iscariot, am now starting this journal after having seen the most profound experience of my life. I have just this very day met the savior of my life and soul."

(DIRECTOR): DR. DONNER'S VOICE NOW FADES IN AS A CAMERA FOCUSES ON HIM AS HE SITS IN AN EASY CHAIR WITH A GLASS OF WATER BESIDE HIM:

"Ladies and gentlemen, You are hearing the opening words of the most reviled man in history: Judas Iscariot. Yes, that's right, Judas Iscariot. Furthermore, these words are incontrovertibly his."

(DIRECTOR): THE CAMERA NOW SHIFTS TO THE CO-MODERATOR, A WELL KNOWN FILM STAR WITH A RENOWNED REPUTATION FOR CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS VIEWS, WHO LEADS WITH A QUESTION:

"Dr. Donner, we're hearing by these words what Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of our Christ, wrote upon his first encounter with the man who literally changed time. But, how do you know these are in fact his words?"

(DIRECTOR): THE CAMERA DRAWS BACK TO BRING BOTH MEN INTO THE SCREEN AS THEY CONTINUE WITH THEIR DISCUSSION:

"That is, in fact, the question of the millennia. But, unquestionably, they do come from a journal that was discovered under a pile of detritus that had at one time been most likely a house or inn

or similar abode. Anyway, this document had been stored in a box that was sealed from the corrosion of air these thousands of years. It's truly a miracle. No other words can be used in this case...just a miracle."

"Dr. Donner, am I to understand this manuscript was undisturbed through thousands of years of war, strife, farming, construction, and Lord knows what else?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. It's only a miracle that we are witness to one of the world's profound dramas."

"Were you able to start reading it like any other long-lost journal?"

"No, not quite. It wasn't that simple. We had first to preserve the document itself page by page. We had to seal the box against the polluted air of Jerusalem until it was moved to a nitrogen-filled chamber that was illuminated with special lights that would not fade the ink. Then, we separated each page and inventoried them. This was no easy task as many of the pages were in effect glued together. They had been compressed so long they had almost fused. But, with infinite patience, we succeeded."

(DIRECTOR): THE CO-MODERATOR THEN TURNS DR. DONNER TO A FILM CLIP THAT WAS BEGUN TO SHOW THIS LABORIOUS PROCESS.

"Could you talk us through what we're seeing, please?"

This, the good doctor does with no further prompting. Each step was fully, but succinctly described. His colleague then led with another question.

(DIRECTOR): CAMERAS NOW COME BACK TO DR. DONNER AND THE CO-MODERATOR

"Sir, understanding this is an ancient document, how were you able to confirm its authenticity?"

"Again, that was an important question. Recently, over the past several years, scholars have been reviewing the so-called *Gospel According to Judas*.<sup>1</sup> That too, was an ancient document and one with undoubted historical importance. But, it also was flawed by having been written almost 400 years after the death of Christ. Therefore, the possibility of doubt must always exist because of its being written by someone without direct experience or understanding of Judas's betrayal. One could ask many questions. Is this a recording of accurate oral text? Does the writer have "an agenda," and if so, what is it? Lots of questions that this text doesn't present. With Judas' journal, "what you see is what you get" to quote a current idiom.

"So, the first step was to test it by carbon dating to ascertain its age. When we saw the paper existed at the time of the crucifixion, we were understandably ecstatic. The next step was then to review carefully the penmanship of the document. Did it correspond to the style of the day, and was it consistent? That had been a great question with the *James Ossuary*.

“For those of our viewers who aren’t familiar with this ossuary, let me provide a bit of background. This ossuary is a limestone box which was made to hold the bones of someone apparently called James. On its side is an inscription: “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” If genuine, then this discovery suggested strongly of the existence of Jesus and a possible family relationship of a brother named James.

“Since its discovery, scholars of many different backgrounds have debated whether the inscription is genuine, or is it a forgery? <sup>2</sup> Some have noted how the engraver’s penmanship varies and hence, assumed not to be of the same hand. Frankly, that question still plagues us to this day. But, for this diary, no such problems seemed to appear. The penmanship is consistent throughout the text.”

“Then based on these findings, you became satisfied it was in fact the genuine diary of Judas Iscariot.”

“Of course, many more tests were run, but yes, in substance, they all consistently indicate a genuine diary or journal by a man named Judas Iscariot.”

“So, assuming it is the real McCoy, what did it teach you?”

“Teach me? What a question. But, if you mean, have I become a Christian as result of reading this testimony? No, not a chance. What we’re talking about here is a matter of scholarship, not of faith. I was born a Jew and will die a Jew. But, about this man, Christ and his followers, it taught us a lot.”

“Such as?”

(DIRECTOR): CAMERA FOCUSSES ON DR. DONNER:

“First, that Christ was a man. He did exist. He did live. He did teach, and as he did so, we saw how he earned his living. As these men wandered around Israel, they had to support themselves. Christ was a carpenter and he regularly practiced his craft. Peter, John, and James were fishermen who provided food for themselves and as repayment to their hosts. We also see the apostles and Christ acting and reacting to each other in human terms on a daily basis which is incredibly important.

Pausing for moment, Dr. Donner mused over his next words.

“You know, Judas, as well as the other apostles, believed that Christ was someone special. They wouldn’t have followed him otherwise. But, when their leader grumbles about being hungry, yelps when he smacks his finger with a hammer, laughs at jokes, he is acting as a man, and that’s how people saw him. He was a fully human person with whom they related in like kind.

“So, all of these people were human, and they must be seen in those terms. Even, finally, on a spiritual basis, we see how his pastoral duties were essentially a communion among himself, his apostles, and those listening to his word. He delivered it to people by bringing them together in a very human way: gathering around a table and breaking bread. It was an old tradition when Christ lived, and it’s one that flourishes today in the Mediterranean. By continuing this relationship among priests and

parishioners, the Catholic Church has it right on by making their communion the central part of their Mass.

“Next, we have almost a television monitor into the inner workings of a decaying mind such as we rarely have even today. Benedict Arnold, by contrast, betrayed his leader, George Washington and almost scuttled our entire revolt from England. But, because he didn’t leave a detailed record as did Judas, his reasons are the stuff of historical debate. Rather, with Judas, psychologists will have a field day with his journal.

(DIRECTOR): CAMERA NOW FOCUSES ON THE CO-MODERATOR AS HE ASKS:

“When will the diary be published? For our viewers, that truly is the 64,000 dollar question.”

(DIRECTOR): CAMERA NOW RETURNS TO DR. DONNER:

“This is a matter for the publishers to determine, but certainly with its relevancy to many of the issues and concerns people have about early Christianity, I can assure you it will be very shortly.”

Continuing, Dr. Donner changed the discussion to what Judas’ wrote.

“When modern readers get this book, there are some things they need to remember. First, while Judas wrote in the vernacular of his day, modern readers would find literal translations confusing. For example, the number thirty to Judas was XXX because it conformed to the numbering system used by business throughout the empire. For us, reading the text for the first time, we could become confused as to whether that was a number or simply a deletion of an underlying word being scratched out. However, because he was writing about an issue of supreme importance to himself as a Jew, Judas dated his entries using the Hebrew calendar. Doing so ensured a continuity of his remarks to those of his predecessors. So, for example, his first entry is 1 Tamuz 3790 or 18 June 30, which is generally understood only by scholars or those who have a Hebrew/Gregorian date converter. So, to relieve confusion, all such references are changed to the common parlance of our modern calendar. This same thought is continued in our changing many of the names cited in his diary to those in use today. For example, the River Jordan is actually a British name. It’s original name was *Nehar haYarden* which clearly would not be known to anyone other than a Biblical scholar. So, River Jordan, and other similar names it is.<sup>3</sup>

“There is another issue that readers must understand, and that is how to translate Judas’ words. Literal translations do not always convey what an author intended, and so it is true with this book. Idioms are a particular problem. English speakers easily understand that something is expensive when they hear: “It costs an arm and a leg.” Italians have something similar: “Costa un occhio dalla testa,” or “It costs an eye from the head.” But, use these idioms from another culture, and the listener is liable to believe he’s fallen in with a den of murderers.

“The question becomes one of how freely translations should be made in order to convey the meaning in the author’s head. To this extent, we have tried very hard to write in a manner that will reach across the centuries to tell us about Judas’ torment, and this sometimes means using modern idioms.

“But, there is a more important issue we are not quite positive about.”

(DIRECTOR): THE CAMERAS FOCUS CLOSELY ONTO THE CO-MODERATOR’S FACE AS HE HUNCHES FORWARD IN ATTENTIVE ALERTNESS:

“And what is that, Dr. Donner?”

(DIRECTOR): THE CAMERAS NOW TURN TO DR. DONNER WHO ALSO IS SEEN IN AN ATTENTIVE POSITION AS THOUGH TO EMPHASIZE THE SERIOUSNESS OF AN IMPORTANT POINT:

“It is the issue as to what Judas intended to do with his journal. Did he intend for it to be copied, published if you will, or was it simply the private musings of a man dealing with the torments of his life?

(DIRECTOR): OFF CAMERA, THE CO-MODERATOR’S VOICE ASKS:

“Could you explain further, please? This is clearly an important issue considering the *Judas Gospel*.

(DIRECTOR): DR. DONNER CONTINUES:

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. Did he intend to record his experiences for posterity? At this point, although we used the word earlier, we know he was not writing a diary that typically note the trivialities of his day such as weather, etc. Rather, it’s more akin to Boswell’s *London Journal* that records in detail significant events and people such as his mentor, Dr. Samuel Johnson. In like manner, Judas recites dialogues between people. This of course is invaluable to us for knowing what the apostles and Jesus were really saying to one another. He also seems to be describing physicalities around him. An example is his discourse about Roman roads. As a Jew, he would not have liked Roman rule, but his family’s trading success, which apparently was rather large, depended greatly on Roman engineering. Consequently, he would have recognized their importance to him and everyone around him, and so, he spent some time describing their construction. Was he writing so that future generations would see his world as he saw it? This is a debate that is only beginning, and which will probably never be entirely answered.”

“What’s your guess?”

Laughing, Dr. Donner replies,

“My guess? I guess I’ve been around too long to give a straight-forward answer, but I would bet Judas himself probably didn’t really know. He obviously knew he was experiencing a historical moment in time, and he wanted to document it. Whether he thought about a gospel for posterity is problematic. I really don’t know...”

(DIRECTOR): THE CAMERA TURNS TO THE CO-MODERATOR AND AS HE WAS ABOUT TO SPEAK, DR DONNER INTERRUPTS:

“Dr. Donner. I’m sorry. You’re about to say something?”

“Yes, thank you. When we first set ourselves up for this interview, I hadn’t really decided on whether to make my next comment, which now I believe is significant.”

“Then please, do so. This program is too important not to do so.”

(DIRECTOR): THE CAMERA TURNS TO DR. DONNER TO SHOW HIM CLEARLY STRUGGLING WITH A DECISION. HE BLINKS HIS EYES AND PURSES HIS LIPS AS WOULD A MAN IN DEEP THOUGHT. FINALLY, HE NODS HIS HEAD AND COMMENCES TO SPEAK.

“Distinguished viewers. I believe I would not be honest with you that your ideas about Christ’s nature might become challenged when you read this book.”

(DIRECTOR): THE CAMERA NEXT FOCUSSES ON THE CO-MODERATOR WHO IS CLEARLY PERPLEXED BY THIS SUDDEN TURN OF UNSCRIPTED EVENTS.

“Dr. Donner, please continue.

“Thank you again. Christians consider Christ as their messiah and Muslims consider him a prophet in the ranks of Moses and their own Mohammed. But, in point of fact, nowhere in the Gospels does Christ directly take either of these titles. Now, it is not my purpose to dwell in the theologies of either of these two great religions. I am not qualified to do so, and even if I were, doing so would be a grave and wrongful intrusion into the deepest beliefs of sincere people. But, likewise, I feel strongly of the need to alert our viewers to expect surprises when they read the diary of Judas. They will be challenged. More than that I will not comment.

(DIRECTOR): THE CAMERA NOW DRAWS BACK TO FRAME BOTH SPEAKERS AS THE CO-MODERATOR SAYS:

“Thank you Dr. Donner. Now, to pause for a station break...”

## Entry 1 - Wonderment

April 3, 32

I, Judas Iscariot, am now starting this journal after having had the most profound experience of my life. I have just this very day possibly met the savior of my life and soul.

This is a new day, but a joy? Nervous is a much better word, I hardly know where to start. But, I am also very much afraid. In just a few hours, my whole life has spun upside down. So, clearly it's best to start now with the beginning of a new life and to record it in this journal to see where I'm going. I'm not sure where it will end, but I am positive it'll never be what was imagined for me when I was born.

This being the case, perhaps I need to review who I am and where I've been. Otherwise, my journal here will lack a foundation by which change can be measured.

But, what is this change? Why am I starting this log of events which I know even now will continue to my dying day?

It seems I have met a man called Jesus of Nazareth. He doesn't live in Judea where he was born, but north near the Sea of Galilee. It was only by chance that I saw him in Jerusalem during this Passover. He was preaching to the crowds about the Lord's coming all the while chasing money changers from the Temple.<sup>1</sup> Later, he talked to the Pharisees, about what, I don't know because their discussion was quiet, but clearly, even from a distance, one could see it was very intense.

Regardless, I was drawn to him. He emitted a spirit that was captivating. Captivating not only for me, but for others as well. Surrounding him were others who were also preaching. Some called themselves "Disciples of Jesus the Messiah." A few called themselves apostles. Why I don't know. Perhaps I shall learn soon enough. But, it was enough to feel myself enveloped in a power unlike anything I have felt before. Literally, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Then, my mind was entranced; yet, I was fully awake and knowing all that was going on around me. What happened? I honestly can't say, but my life has started anew. This, I absolutely know full well.

This really scares me. I feel my life has been spinning out of control since this chance meeting not more than a few hours ago. What has happened?

This can't be me who is writing these words. It's impossible. I'm not just a boy wishing for dreams or a country rube being drawn in by a shell-game swindler. I've travelled and seen men in wicked situations, and I'm not easily fooled. Yet, here I am in a stupor of amazement about a man whom I don't even know. Perhaps I need now to start with a review of myself to ensure I haven't lost my mind.

I was born in Keriath, Judea a little more than eighteen years ago to parents in the mercantile trade. Keriath lies in the extreme south of the land near Edom. As such, it lies fairly close to trade routes along which my parents conduct regional trade and occasionally

with caravans moving along the north-south axis between Egypt to the south and Israel to the north. In fact, it was in pursuit of family business that brought me to Jerusalem when I met Jesus today. I'd like to come back to that meeting in a bit, but only after I complete my assessment of myself.

Although my family has been in the trading business for several generations, we are basically village people. Some people here have family gardens, but not for us. We live by business to include buying all of our food, wine, and whatever else we need for daily needs. Reading, writing and doing sums for accounts are the important elements of our trade.

Consequently, my brothers and I attended synagogue to meet with the priests and discuss the Law with emphasis on business life. Reading and writing, a critically important part of my schooling, were easy for me, but doing Roman sums was particularly difficult to master. For example, how does one add XXXVII and III? In order for me to make sense of it, I learned to position the III's beside the VII to obtain figure looking like this: XXXVIIIII. The I's added up to V which left XXXVV. Combining the V's into another X resulted in XXXX. It's slow, but it works.

Subtracting reverses the process. Taking the XXXX derived above, and subtracting III from it. Here is where I break the last X into V's and one of the V's into I's to makes things easier. Then, subtraction could occur to get my original XXXVII. For example:

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{XXXX} = \text{XXXVV} = \text{XXXVIII} \\ \text{IIII} \\ \text{XXVII} \end{array}$$

With lots of practice, I learned how to do smaller sums in my head, but it wasn't easy. But, if I were to become a merchant in this Roman Empire, learning this process was mandatory. Of course, doing larger sums still involve the manual processes described above. But, again, to survive in this Roman world means doing things the Roman way.

Actually, I have heard of a different system of numbers. Apparently, it involves breaking groups of numbers into groups of ten by using something called a "zero." Traders passing through from the faraway India-land have talked about it and how easy doing sums with it are. I have never seen this system of numbering, but one day I hope to do so.<sup>2</sup> Even if it doesn't lead to anything, this concept interests me. Just as my lessons at synagogue were always interesting. The Rabbi always had something interesting for us to learn. One day, it would a hero story such as Samson or Daniel, and another day it would be the Torah's commandments. Whatever it was, I enjoyed learning it.

Reading from the scrolls stored in the Rabbis' library was always been a treat for me. The stories of ancient heroes and lovely ladies; the wisdom of Solomon; the bravery of David were all tales that excited my imagination. I used to dream of the day when I too could become the stuff of legends. Perhaps I still do...perhaps, this Jesus fellow has stirred these dreams once again. At any rate, I am stirred as I haven't been in a long, long time.



Travel is another passion which I have been doing since I was a child when I first tailed after my father as he went from one town to another. One can always meet new people with interesting things to say. This rumor about the “zero” is just such an example. So, going to Jerusalem was not my first trip of some distance.

Because I seem to have a talent for organizing things, my father often has me make independent trips even though I’m not the oldest of us four brothers. We each have our talents, and my father uses all of them. My eldest brother, Gabriel, is a genius at making sales. He can sell sand to an Arab. Abraham, who is younger than me, has a good sense of administration. Inventory problems simply don’t exist when he’s in charge. He checks all invoices from vendors and routinely finds errors...usually in the vendor’s favor. This attention to detail has saved our firm many shekels over the years. Finally, Joseph, my youngest brother, tends to our camels to ensure they are always fit and ready for travel. My father, of course, is in overall charge of the business. He is a strict person...with us as well as his other employees. But, like God, he is fair. Do your work well, and he is pleased. Make an honest error through a decision that seems wise, and he’ll not scold us. But, be stupid or worse, lie, and his wrath is vengeful.

My mother, Esther, is a typical housewife who is five years younger than my father. Her marriage to Father was arranged like any other. She had actually never spoken to him prior to her marriage. But, through the years, she has come to love him. Now, raising four energetic boys and three daughters, attending to a husband and running a house is a full-time job. She is fortunate in having a couple of slaves who can tend to the heavier jobs along with doing the drudgery of daily cleaning. Right now, these slaves are in the second year of their servitude, so they will be able to work for another five years before deciding whether to take their freedom or not. Surprisingly, some slaves actually do commit themselves to continued servitude. If they have a good master with an assured life of food and shelter, then the hazards of freedom might not look good in comparison despite the Torah’s stigma for doing so. Or, if a slave is married to an enslaved gentile woman by their master, and subsequently has children by her, he may want to remain with them. In those cases, his owner will pierce his ear and attach an identification tag to it.<sup>3</sup> Generally, our slaves have chosen freedom in which case, my mother and father try to find a good position for them. Several, in fact, have continued to work in the family business.

My three sisters as of yet are still very young and live at home. As time passes, when they are around thirteen or fourteen years old, they will be married off to eligible men known in the village. They will be well taught on the arts of cooking, raising children, weaving, etc. Being pretty and coming from a good family as they do, my father will undoubtedly be able to arrange good marriages for them.

But, speaking of marriage, I should be getting married shortly as I’ve now reached my eighteenth year. By this time, my older brother was already married, so I know my time is coming with my younger brothers following shortly thereafter. I really don’t know what I’ll do about this matter if, in fact, I do decide to follow Jesus. I know my parents will think I have lost my mind if I don’t settle down into the family business and social life.

But, why religion? Why now? Of course, we all live according to the Law. As I mentioned above, we boys go to Temple just as my father and our uncles have done. We attend the Sabbath and other holy days. But, beyond that, the Law is simple enough. Live in accordance with it and give God His obedience and nothing more is required. It works and has worked since Moses, blessed be his soul, led us out of the barren lands of Egypt. It is working for my family. We all lead a safe and comfortable life. So why leave it for someone I've hardly met?

Of course, we had the Diaspora which saw the Assyrians conquering all of Israel and Judea and sending us to all points of the world. But, this was in accordance with our covenant with God in which he says, obey My laws, take no other idol before me and you will prosper. So, we Jews prospered under David and Solomon, but then we became stiff-necked and did not obey Him. What else could He do? He did as He did to the world when Noah was alive. He punished us and justly so. However, He has never forgotten us. He has never deserted us. Rather, He has stayed with us until we were allowed to return to our beloved homeland and rebuild our sacred Temple. God be blessed; His might is eternal and universal. For that, we can and must be forever thankful by obeying His law. Thus, my family has been blessed even as we live under the yoke of the Roman legions.

But, again, I keep asking myself, why religion and especially that of Jesus? Apparently, some talk has been raised about his being the son of God after having been consecrated in a baptism of water by his cousin, John, the so-called Baptist. This almost sounds like heresy, and it scares me. Is such talk implying he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies? Are people saying that God has returned as promised in Isaiah, chapter 7, verse 14? Is he truly the messiah we have been awaiting for all these centuries? Is it possible we can anticipate regaining our former glory as an independent empire...no longer beholden to these Roman oppressors? Or is he simply another impostor among many who travel these roads? Worse, is he guilty of blasphemy? I really must pray on these questions.



