

The idea of retelling the last days of Jesus as satire is not new. Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* is a prime example. It lampooned the imbecility and fickleness of the mob and the absurdities of apocalyptic belief systems. Of course, the Pythons were careful to show the real Jesus in the background in an attempt to deflect accusations of blasphemy. It didn’t work: they were still roundly condemned by self-appointed defenders of the faith.

Dick Gross has not hedged his bets in this way. No Brian son of Mandy for him. His Jesus is shown through the eyes of an agnostic and foul-mouthed (though not, as he claims, particularly scatalogical) temple priest who was an active observer of, and participant in, the brief Jesus phenomenon in Jerusalem in 33 AD.

Mordy Ben Ruben is writing his own gospel in 73 AD to set the record straight, having seen Mark’s recent attempt, and read drafts of the other accounts, including the Acts of the Apostles. He is an incorrigible sceptic, but his wife and best friend are more credulous and he is inexorably drawn into the events. His version turns the gospels on their heads. He befriends Judas, the outsider, the only disciple with any brains or nous, and sees right through Jesus, a manic-depressive megalomaniac with a huge ego and no consideration for his followers. The satire abates during the description of the crucifixion, and there are passages of great emotional power, but the resurrection is explained away and no eschatological possibilities are allowed. Miracles are similarly undercut. Every familiar bible story is, with a twist of the kaleidoscope, transformed from magic to gritty realism.
Gross places his ‘Acknowledgements, apologies and anachronisms’ before the text, forestalling some of the objections he clearly expects. Anachronisms abound, and not only those he confesses. As he admits, ‘It is unlikely that the characters would have spoken Yiddish.’ It is also unlikely that Jesus would have called Judas his ‘event manager’ and ‘risk assessor’. A lot of this is just fun: we are told, for example, that after John the Baptist’s death ‘Jesus and Judas spent a lot of energy defining their product and market niche,’ and they worry about putting ‘bums on grass’.

*Jesus, Judas and Mordy Ben Ruben* has a serious message despite its predominantly flippant tone. In the Epilogue, stepping out of the character of Mordy, the author explains that his story exemplifies ‘how death is sometimes recklessly embraced by those who, without any evidence, create and believe in a fantasy afterlife. The falsity of the gift of death tempts some of us to be too careless with our only gift, the gift of life.’ Mordy, in fact, spends much of the novel yelling this message, embellished with expletives and insults, at affronted believers. This is where the novel loses impact: the message is sensible; the messenger becomes increasingly insufferable.