We Are All Amos

whose marriage to Gershom's son Mi­

support his studies.

friend breaks off their relationship to

of Shmuel Ash, a graduate student at

in a rather claustrophobic house in Je­

alia Abravanel, a woman in her

in the winter of 1959-60, when the life

abandons his thesis, entitled

by his longtime collaborator, Nicholas

translated to write on the topic and be­

The Gospel According to Judas,

translated by Nicholas de Lange
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
2016, pp. 320, $25

Judas

Amos Oz

Both people who fear change and people
who do change are considered traitors.

Over the course of Shmuel's stay in
Gershom's house, he ponders the stories
of two men famously labeled traitors.
One is the New Testament account of
Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' 12 disciples,
who turned his teacher over to the Ro­
man authorities, an action that led to
Jesus' crucifixion—and ultimately to
Judas's suicide. The other is that of the
state and that, instead, they should
attempt to cooperate with the Palestin­
ians, living together in an arrangement
which transcended the form of the
nation-state. Atalia finds
justification for her father's
political position in her as­

she rages. “You shed rivers of
innocent blood. You sacrificed an entire
generation. You drove hundreds of thou­sands of Arabs out of their homes. You
sent shiploads of Holocaust survivors
straight from the quayside to the battle­
field. All so that there would be a Jewish
state here.” Gershom, on the other hand,
views Shealtiel as dangerously naïve
in his belief that there could be an ac­

is oxidation institution and spent the rest of
his life as a pariah secluded in his home.

As he considers the characters Judas
and Shealtiel, Shmuel questions and
explores what a traitor is: When Judas
turned Jesus over to the Romans, was he
really a traitor, or perhaps the most loyal
folower of Jesus' ideals? When Shealtiel
opposed the creation of the State of Is­
rael, was he really a traitor to Zionism,
or its most loyal adherent?

Shmuel comes to believe that Judas
was one of Jesus' most devoted follow­
ners. He revises the Judas story as one in
which the disciple arranged for Jesus to
be crucified only because he believed
that Jesus would miraculously survive
the crucifixion and thereby win the world
over to his religious vision. At the same
time, Shmuel becomes preoccupied
with the conflicting views of Gershom
and Atalia on whether, in opposing the
creation of the State of Israel in 1948,
Shealtiel was a national traitor. Shealtiel
thought it would be a tragic mistake for
Ben-Gurion and the rest of the Zionist
leadership to declare the establishment
of the State and that, instead, they should
attempt to cooperate with the Palestin­
ians, living together in an arrangement
that transcended the form of the
nation-state. Atalia finds
justification for her father's
political position in her as­

s the course of Shmuel's stay in
Gershom's house, he ponders the stories
of two men famously labeled traitors.
One is the New Testament account of
Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' 12 disciples,
who turned his teacher over to the Ro­
man authorities, an action that led to
Jesus' crucifixion—and ultimately to
Judas's suicide. The other is that of the
fictional Shealtiel Abravanel, Atalia's fa­
ter, who opposed David Ben-Gurion's
decision to declare the State of Israel's
independence in 1948. Shealtiel was ex­

Amos Oz's novel Habesorah Al Pi Yehudab
(The Gospel According to Judas), translated
by his longtime collaborator, Nicholas
de Lange, under the title Judas, opens
in the winter of 1959-60, when the life
of Shmuel Ash, a graduate student at
the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is
turned upside down. His longtime girl­
friend breaks off their relationship to
marry her former boyfriend, and Shm­
uel abandons his thesis, entitled “Jew­
ish Views of Jesus,” for lack of anything
original to write on the topic and be­
cause his parents can no longer afford to
support his studies.

Shmuel takes a job as a live-in com­
ppanion of Gershom Wald, an elderly,
disabled, retired widower living in Je­
rusalem. Living with Gershom is Ata­
alia on whether, in opposing the
creation of the State of Israel in 1948,
Shealtiel was a national traitor. Shealtiel
thought it would be a tragic mistake for
Ben-Gurion and the rest of the Zionist
leadership to declare the establishment
of the State and that, instead, they should
attempt to cooperate with the Palestin­
ians, living together in an arrangement
that transcended the form of the
nation-state. Atalia finds
justification for her father's
political position in her as­

Both people who fear
change and people
who do change are
considered traitors.

continues on page 78
right moment, while there was still time.”

In both cases, it's not clear who is loyal and who is traitorous. At the heart of each of these two narratives is a conflict between a character who undertook to radically change reality (Judas, Ben-Gurion) and a character who sought to maintain the status quo (Jesus, Shealtiel Abravanel). In the novel, Oz suggests that the two figures who gambled to radically change reality succeeded in bringing about two revolutionary creations—Christianity and the State of Israel. Once these creations were established, however, they abandoned the best of the ideals that had inspired them. The Christians established a powerful church that engaged in religious violence against Jews and others deemed heretics. As Gershom observes to Shmuel, “Your Jesus was... a great dreamer, perhaps the greatest dreamer who ever lived. But his disciples were not dreamers. They were hungry for power and, in the end, like all those who hunger for power, they became shedders of blood.” And, as Atalia says about the founding father of Israel, “It was Ben-Gurion who was the dreamer... Ben-Gurion and the herd who followed him like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. To the slaughter. To violent expulsion. To eternal hatred between the two communities [the Jews and the Arabs].”

So who was the traitor? As Oz observes in his Times of Israel interview, both “people who fear change and people who do change are considered traitors.” For Oz, the history of Zionism and of the State of Israel can be viewed as an ongoing series of acts that have elements of both betrayal of and loyalty to the ideals of Jewish nationalism at the heart of Israel's identity. Neither the so-called hawks nor the so-called doves have a monopoly on either. Perhaps Oz's message is that Israel needs to keep thinking critically about what is best for the nation rather than make any assumption about who is the enemy and who is the defender of the culmination of the Zionist dream.