



The Gospel of Judas: Recent Discoveries, the Bible, and Tradition

How should Christians view the recently published Gospel of Judas? Does it help us understand the life and ministry of Jesus? Or does it confuse things?

Introduction

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John begin the New Testament. But are these Gospels the only ones connected with Jesus' twelve apostles? Not at all! Manuscripts of some thirty Gospels have been recovered in either complete or fragmentary form, many of which are referred to by names of Jesus' apostles, including Judas. The *Gospel of Judas*, acquired by the Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art in 2000, translated through the auspices of National Geographic, and published in April 2006, dates between 220 and 340 CE but is a copy of the original Greek manuscript that was probably written between 130 and 180 CE. Written in Coptic, the language of Egyptian Christians, it was discovered in the Egyptian desert in the 1970s and has a gnostic perspective similar to what is found in the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Before examining its contents, let us consider how we should classify this book in relation to the rest of the New Testament, how the four New Testament Gospels portray Judas, and what the early church leaders mentioned either about this Gospel or about Judas. This background will enable us to consider why so much excitement and controversy has arisen over the *Gospel of Judas*.

Classification

How we refer to the *Gospel of Judas* and other writings that have not been included in the New Testament makes a difference in what we are able to allow ourselves to learn from these writings. The *Gospel of Judas* and other



Gospels such as the *Gospel of Peter*, books that deal directly with the apostles' lives such as the *Acts of Peter*, books that fall within the genre of letters such as *3 Corinthians*, and apocalypses such as the *Apocalypse of Paul* are often referred to as the New Testament Apocrypha. Unlike the Old Testament Apocrypha (called the Deuterocanonical books by Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Russian Orthodox churches), which includes a fixed number of books, the New Testament Apocrypha does not have a fixed number, and so its list has been expanded as more manuscripts have been discovered.

Some scholars prefer to designate these books as Christian Apocrypha since the term *New Testament Apocrypha* (or *Apocryphal New Testament*) suggests that these books greatly resemble the New Testament books, but, in fact, they may not, even though they do share Christian concerns. Also, some scholars dislike designating the books as New Testament Apocrypha since the term tends to separate them from another group of additional writings

called the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, thus conveying the false impression that the New Testament Apocrypha provides us only data about Christianity and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha provides us only data about Judaism. The term *apocrypha*, which means “hidden,” has so often been used negatively to convey that these books are fictitious or spurious that we do not realize that many early Christians considered these books as sacred, that the beliefs among early Christians were diverse, that the first list of the twenty-seven books in New Testament did not emerge until that of the bishop Athanasius in 387 CE, and that disagreement about the books included in this list persisted for many years afterward, even as late as the Reformation when Martin Luther rejected James as “a right strawy epistle” (Introduction, 1522 edition, German New Testament).

Recognizing that all these terms have their limitations, reference to the New Testament books as *canonical early Christian writings* and the New Testament Apocrypha as *non-canonical early Christian writings* has become popular among other scholars. When we use these two terms, the *Gospel of Judas* is, therefore, a part of that group of non-canonical early Christian writings that were omitted from the New Testament canon for one or more reasons: they were not widely read, they were written too late, and they did not contain what was considered correct doctrine. As we shall see, the gnostic teachings in the *Gospel of Judas* contributed to its omission from the New Testament and so demonstrate to us the diversity of early Christian beliefs.

Judas in the New Testament

Turning to the four New Testament Gospels, we discover that three provide Judas’ name among those whom Jesus commissions as his disciples, listing him last and specifying him as the one who would “betray” Jesus (Matt. 10:4; Mark 3:19) or become “a traitor” (Luke 6:16). Except in John 12:4–6, where Judas objects to Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet with nard and functions as the disciples’ treasurer who steals from their funds, nothing is mentioned about Judas until he conspires to help the religious leaders arrest Jesus (Matt. 26:14–16; Mark 14:10–11; Luke 22:3–6). References in John 12:6 to his thievery and lack of compassion for the poor have sometimes led to the assumption that greed motivated Judas’s betrayal.

Judas’s motives are complex. Maybe the unspecified amount mentioned in Mark 14:10–11 was large enough

to entice Judas to betray Jesus. But can greed be his primary motive? If we consider Matthew 26:15, which specifies the payment for his collaboration with the religious leaders as thirty pieces of silver, greed must not have motivated him since it was a paltry amount, that is, the same as the price of an injured slave (Exod. 21:32) and the wages of a shepherd (Zech. 11:12). This allusion to a shepherd’s wage aptly connects with Matthew 9:36, where Jesus pities the crowds because they are like sheep without a shepherd, and with Matthew 1:1–17, which traces Jesus’ descent from David but emphasizes his similarity to David before David became king, that is, when David tended sheep and defended them, not when he aggressively fought battles before and after he became king. The thirty silver coins, therefore, more likely serve theological purposes and tell us more about the manner in which its author understood that events in Jesus’ life fulfilled the Scriptures. The Gospels of Luke and John also do not confirm greed as Judas’s primary motive. The reason provided for Judas’s conspiracy in both these Gospels is Satan’s influence (Luke 22:3; John 13:2). Does that mean that Judas’s pilfering of the disciples’ funds mentioned in John 12:4–6 has little to do with his betrayal of Jesus in exchange for money?

Judas appears three more times: at the supper before Jesus’ arrest (Matt. 26:20–25; Mark 14:17–21; John 13:21–30; see Luke 22:21–23), in the garden to enable the Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus (Matt. 26:47–50; Mark 14:43–46; Luke 22:47–48; John 18:2–9), and on his death after failing to return the money (Matt. 27:3–10; Acts 1:16–20). In all these scenes Judas’s motive is uncertain. At the disciples’ last meal together, emphasis rests on Jesus’ omniscience of what Judas is about to do (Matt. 26:21, 25; Mark 14:18–20; Luke 22:21–22; John 13:21, 26), suggesting that Judas is not exercising his own will. On the other hand, Jesus’ judgment that it would have been better that his betrayer had not even been born (Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21) conveys that Judas had a choice and is responsible for his decision to conspire with the Jewish leaders. At the same time, Judas’s action is softened in Matthew 27:3–5 by his attempt to return the money and so reverse the ensuing events and by his decision to kill himself when that failed, an act that can be interpreted as the usual way a disciple would express loyalty to his leader by dying with him. The Gospel of John most clearly explains that the betrayal is beyond Judas’s control since Satan enters Judas at the precise moment after Jesus had given him the morsel of bread

and had divulged to his disciples' inquiries the means of identifying his betrayer (John 13:26–27).

Scholars who accept that the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John were written later than the Gospel of Mark and so provide embellishments have sometimes claimed that Mark's portrayal of Judas as committing the heinous act most accurately conveys what happened historically. Many scholars reluctantly argue in that fashion since the Gospel of Mark also has its theological agenda. Some scholars have mentioned that the Greek word for "betray" ought to be consistently translated as "hand over" or "deliver," just as it is in Jesus' own foretelling about his death in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (Mark 9:31; 10:33; Matt. 17:22; 20:19; and Luke 9:44; 18:32), so that the word can have a fuller range of meanings and enable us to reconsider Judas's role in Jesus' trial and death and also to consider that some Christians held another view of Judas's role, one found in the *Gospel of Judas*.

Early Church Leaders on the *Gospel of Judas*

Until its recent translation, the content of the *Gospel of Judas* and its gnostic connections were known only in a secondhand manner, much like the content of other non-canonical Gospels such as the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* that are known to us only because of what the ancient historian Eusebius and the early church leaders Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Jerome tell us. Although Origen (185–254 CE) argued that Judas hanged himself in order to seek Christ in the other world and ask his pardon (*Fr. Matt.* 35), the first and only mention of this Gospel is Irenaeus's derogatory criticism (about 180 CE) about a gnostic group called Cainites who used the *Gospel of Judas* and viewed Judas as enlightened and worthy of veneration because his actions attempted to hasten events that would force the people to demand Jesus' release and placement on the throne.

Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above. . . . They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the *Gospel of Judas*. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.31.1, Roberts-Rambaut's translation)



Similar to Irenaeus's criticism is that found in *Against All Heresies*, a third-century treatise usually attached to Tertullian's (155–230 CE) *De praescriptione haereticorum* and in Epiphanius's *Panarion* (310–402 CE). Neither specifically refers to the *Gospel of Judas*, but they too denigrate the views of this early gnostic sect.

Themes in the *Gospel of Judas*

Although specific miracles and the disciples' names except for Judas's are both notably absent in the *Gospel of Judas*, the mentioning of Jesus' performance of miracles, his calling of his disciples, and his teaching about the end of the world that follow its introduction remind us of the four New Testament Gospels. Especially different is the omission of a section that tells about the events leading up to and including Jesus' death. In fact, the first sentence of the *Gospel of Judas* lets us know that this Gospel has a purpose quite different from that of the four New Testament Gospels, for it states that its contents consist of a secret revelation that Jesus had conveyed to Judas. Also, although the four New Testament Gospels contain dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, the *Gospel of Judas* contains even more. Its emphasis on conversations between Jesus and his disciples—especially between Jesus and Judas—classify it as a dialogue Gospel (like the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*) rather than a narrative Gospel.

In these dialogues, we read that Jesus views Judas as the disciple who truly understands him and his cosmological teachings (vv. 35, 47–58) so that Judas can become enlightened and then carry out the task of handing him over to the authorities (v. 46 and conclusion). How does this special teaching to Judas compare with what is found in the four New Testament Gospels? In Mark 4:11 Jesus mentions the mystery of God given to all the disciples, but we never learn what this teaching includes. In John 13:31–17:26, Jesus provides extensive and advanced teaching to a select few, that is, to his disciples; this designation of those who accept him

as having “knowledge” (translation of the Greek word *gnosis*) about him and those who reject him as not having knowledge about him were teachings that made the Gospel of John a favorite among gnostic Christians (see, for example, John 10:7–18, where Jesus says, “I know my own and my own know me.”). Emphasis on “knowledge” of the divine light within oneself as the means for gaining salvation, characteristic of gnostic writings, is found in verses 50 and 54 in the *Gospel of Judas*.

In particular, the *Gospel of Judas* exemplifies an early version of Sethian Gnosticism that understood Seth not only as marking a new beginning for humanity after Cain killed Abel but also as having been later reborn in Jesus (vv. 49, 52). Although the identity of Barbelo is uncertain here, in similar Sethian gnostic texts Barbelo (v. 35) is the heavenly Mother from the divine realm beyond earthly existence. In Sethian gnostic cosmology (derived from additional gnostic texts and actually much more complex than what is summarized here), the Invisible Spirit (or Father) transcends the realm of being, which Barbelo (also called Sophia) projects and reflects, whereas the Child (Seth and then Jesus) generates itself from Barbelo, either spontaneously or from a spark of the Father’s light. The human realm developed when divine Wisdom, personified as Sophia (or Barbelo), attempted to contemplate the Invisible Spirit and in the process generated misshapen offspring, one of whom is the Creator (or Demiurge) of the human world. To prevent Sophia from returning to the divine realm, the

Creator divided her up and placed her within numerous human bodies. Jesus allows those humans who embody part of Sophia to become aware of this knowledge within them, that is, that they are imprisoned within a human body and belong to the divine realm with the Invisible Spirit. Since gnostics believed that the human body is a prison, Judas was merely beginning the chain of events that would release Jesus’ Spirit from its physical constraints: “For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me” (v. 56). In the final scene when Judas turns Jesus over to the Jewish religious leaders, this act, therefore, is an act of obedience to Jesus’ instructions to him.

Conclusion

In the *Gospel of Judas*, the disciple Judas has special knowledge and a special task. Obviously, despite its affinities with the four New Testament Gospels, its contents differ remarkably—but not from later Sethian gnostic writings. This Gospel leaves us with many questions about early Christian beliefs. What attracted its members to the teachings in this Gospel? What was so dangerous about them that made these teachings disappear? Or have they disappeared?

About the Writer

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