
Is there a Gospel in the Gospel of Judas?

Casting Judas not as a culpable betrayer, but as an intimate friend and collaborator of Jesus, the recently announced Gospel of Judas has understandably generated a stir. However, what the ancient document says about Jesus is even more controversial. According to this *Gospel*, Jesus was a bearer of a deep secret that apparently he revealed to no other disciple except Judas; and then got his help to die that his spirit may be released to some heavenly realm. Recruited for this purpose, Judas then *betrays* the Master as an act of intimate friendship. This is heady stuff. Does the Gospel of Judas cast doubts on the accounts of the four traditional Gospels and, implicitly, on all of early Christianity?

The fact that the Gospel of Judas has been authenticated as belonging to the third century, the original written about a century earlier, does not of course mean what it says is true. St. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 180 AD) knew about it and denounced it as heresy. Many other Church Fathers and theologians have, before and after Irenaeus, refuted the same kind of thinking found in dozens of similar documents which distorted the apostolic faith. Scholars have called that religious ideology Gnosticism, a phenomenon that flourished mainly in the second century and created serious problems for the Church. Since the late 1940's, when a slew of them were found buried in the dry sands of Egypt, scholars have been able to study these document first hand.

In the National Geographic documentary featuring the Gospel of Judas, biblical scholar Craig Evans, near the end of the film, bluntly stated that nothing new and nothing historically authentic is to be found in the document. Although the documentary leaned to the opposite view, most scholars will probably agree with Evans. The Gospel of Judas is but another small window to Gnosticism, a hodgepodge of religious speculations that exploded on the scene during the second century. At that time, individual intellectuals or small and elitist groups around them, bothered by the basic story of the Bible, especially the *violent* God of the Old Testament and the *scandalous* death and resurrection of Jesus generated their own religious philosophy. They combined Jewish, Christian and pagan elements to construct literally fantastic systems of speculation including astrology and magic. The core theme, found in the Gospel of Judas, is secret knowledge (gnosis) that leads to salvation.

What was that secret knowledge about? It was essentially about the Gnostic system itself that roughly runs as follows: A higher god, infinitely superior to the God of the Old Testament, sends periodic illuminators to earth with a secret message to draw back to heaven the inner divine sparks of receptive human beings hopelessly caught in utter darkness. According to this worldview, the Old Testament God is an inferior and ignorant God, responsible for creating the lowest sphere of existence, the earth, where all the evil of the cosmos had dredged. Material things, including human bodies, if not evil, are the seat of evil, and to be escaped from. So in Gnostic thinking the eternal Christ, who was the son of the higher god and not the Son of the God of the Old Testament, could not truly have taken human flesh. Instead, he temporarily entered into Jesus at his baptism and later, at some point during his arrest and suffering, left the material body and returned to the sphere of light.

In the Gnostic system, the saving death and resurrection of Christ play no role and they are usually entirely omitted. The one killed is not the Son of God, but only the human Jesus, whose body presumably decayed to dust. What is decisive for the Gnostic view is not the person of Jesus the Christ, crucified and risen, but the Gnostic *gospel* itself, that is, the message of the secret Gnostic system. This system was thought to provide the key to a kind of self-salvation through self-knowledge and self-realization in the discovery of the inner divine self.

What's wrong with all this? The whole thing. That Jesus passed on a single secret to a single intimate collaborator is immensely absurd. Jesus conducted an open ministry addressing his message to all and publicly conflicting with religious leaders over such issues as the Sabbath observance, the ritual washing of hands, and the temple activities. Not even radical critics would deny essential truth in these words of Jesus: *I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together; I have said nothing secretly* (John 18:20). The events of the early Church and its astonishing mission, reported in the Book of Acts, were *not done in a corner*, St. Paul pointedly observed (Acts 26:26). Against the Gospel of Judas, none of the New Testament books, all written in the first century, give any hint that early Christianity was all about elites conveying secrets to elites. The *mysteries* of God's kingdom proclaimed by Jesus (Matthew 13:11) were not about objective teachings, such as *love your enemies* and many others like it in the Sermon on the Mount. These were taught to all, disciples and the crowds. Rather, the mystery of God's kingdom, both then and today, is the same: it is the personal experience of grace and forgiveness arising in human hearts from hearing about God's rule and living by the gospel.

The Gospel of Judas turns Christianity on its head. Long ago St. Irenaeus accused the Gnostics of using the Bible as a mosaic from which they extracted selected tiles and created a wholly different portrait of Christ, turning, as he said, the portrait of the king into that of a fox! The Christian gospel puts Christ at the center of the message salvation and proclaims a true incarnation, a true death, and true resurrection by which of sinners are redeemed from the power of sin and enjoy a new life of grace in obedience to Christ. Contrary to the Gnostic message, the Christian gospel is rooted in the Old Testament as part of the saving plan of the only true God and Father of Jesus Christ. St. Paul declares

that there is only one Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9) and that he and all the numerous eye-witnesses to the risen Christ preach the same Gospel of the crucified, buried and risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:1-11). In view of the testimony of these eyewitnesses, many of whom had actually walked with Jesus, only a fool would attribute any credibility to a strange document written one hundred fifty years later.

Let readers be aware that there can be no compromise here. One cannot choose parts from the traditional Gospels and parts from the Gospel of Judas. The two versions of salvation by their very nature negate each other. They are not two alternative, more or less acceptable, takes on what authentic Christianity was and is. The Gnostic gospel proclaims Christ as a kind of disembodied messenger who opposes the work of the Old Testament God. The Christian gospel proclaims an incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ in complete harmony with the same God who is his Father. The Gnostic message views the human body as virtually evil, something to discard. The Christian message holds the human body as holy, redeemable, destined for glorious transformation through resurrection. The Gnostic way of salvation is one of inward meditation toward self-realization. The Christian way of salvation is taking up the cross in obedience to Christ and in communion with his body, the Church, which has a vital mission in part to work for justice and peace in this world that God loves. When the two interpretative perspectives are assessed as wholes, the historical and theological evidence clearly favors the Christian option as being the most faithful to the message of the Bible and worthy of life-long commitment.

What about Judas' betrayal? The betrayal was not as decisive for Jesus' death as one might think. Jesus' enemies would have gotten to him one way or another. Jesus did not, of course, need Judas' help to die, if Jesus' wanted to do that, because he could have surrendered to the authorities himself. The idea that Jesus was looking to die is totally refuted by the experience of Gethsemane in which Jesus with distress and tears prayed three times to be spared the cross.

The betrayal of Judas is significant in its moral (rather immoral) immensity. Yet, why did Judas betray Jesus? Was it envy, greed, an attempt to force Jesus' hand toward revolution against the Romans, or even an attempt at a reconciliation meeting with the religious leaders for the common national good? No little attention in print and film has been given to such questions, and it is no sin. The vilification of Judas in Christian history is lamentable. For Christians, the right response to all sinners, including ourselves, is sorrow and prayer in the spirit of Christ's love who forgave his crucifiers. What a magnificent testimony to God's forgiveness, if Judas, like Peter, had repented of his misdeed and run up to Jesus as he stumbled up the hill to Golgotha and asked for mercy! Forgiveness would have been certain. But it was not to be. Falling into despair on account of his betrayal, Judas killed himself, an act that would otherwise have no reasonable explanation, unless one is prepared to adopt the Gnostic system and see Judas as committing suicide to release his own soul to astral regions.

Who has the story right? The second-century Gnostics with their new-fangled speculations, or the earliest Christians who provided the traditions behind the four

Gospels? If it were not a culpable betrayal, why would early Christians want to create and perpetuate an embarrassing story about one of the twelve disciples handing over his Master to the enemies? To reverse morally the betrayal into an act of friendship seems utterly ludicrous.

The crux of the fuss has to do with the value wars in the second as well as the twenty-first centuries. Over recent centuries, the failings of Christians and institutional Christianity, wars and all, have caused offense to many intellectuals who have consequently looked elsewhere for answers. Out of frustration and sometimes hatred, some have even proposed and have actively sought either radically to revise or even wholly to destroy traditional Christianity. They have wanted to throw out the proverbial baby with the water. This sort of thing is both regrettable and unacceptable. The institutional Church ought to be fully transparent and get its act together for an effective mission in the world. However, a radically revised Christianity is no Christianity at all, but only a fake shadow of it, unworthy of support. One must also consider that the despisers of Christianity have not come up with some viable communal alternative that works.

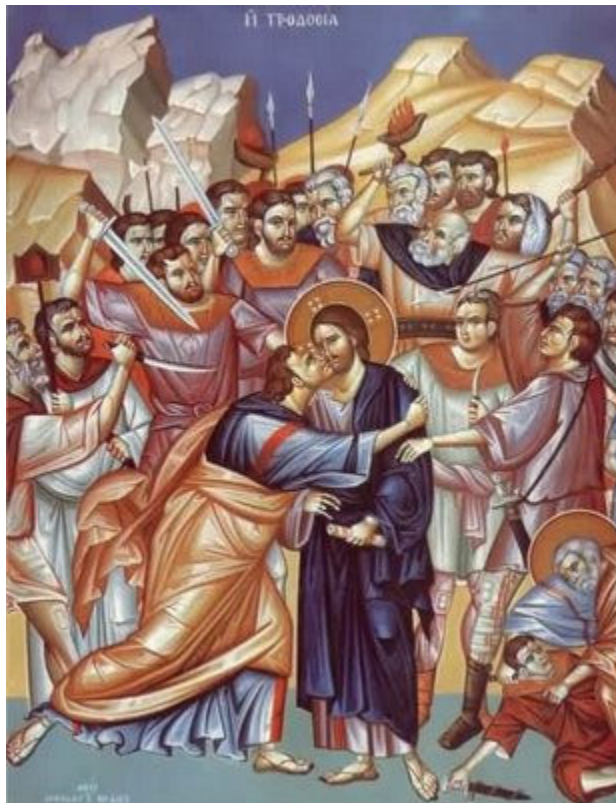
The ancient Gnostics seem to have been gripped by similar frustrations and anger. The pain of an unjust and violent world led the Gnostics to the dreamy ideal of escaping from reality instead of facing it. They thought to find self-redemption in meditative self-absorption and the construction of ethereal speculative systems, rather than by following the way of the cross and martyrdom as adherents of apostolic Christianity did. Part of the spiritual revolt of the Gnostics, so it seems, was to attack basic teachings of the Bible and the Church. And what crazy stuff it was that some came up with. The Naassenes or Ophites (the respective words in Hebrew and Greek mean *snake*) venerated the deceiving serpent of Genesis thought to have the wisdom of the superior god against the plan of the Old Testament God! Other Gnostics advocated three, seven, nine, thirty or thirty-three levels of divinity. Marcion, an extreme ascetic who saw evil in matter, allowed only single people in his communities. He prohibited marriage and childbearing because, in his view, such practices aided the work of the inferior creator god. And so Marcion condemned his own congregations to eventual extinction.

These examples may show that it is not the case, as some loudly claim today, that oppressive bishops and a rigid Church suppressed the Gnostics. For centuries the Church was under persecution and had no social or political power to oppress anyone. Naturally the leaders and theologians of the Church were concerned to maintain the apostolic traditions and therefore they disciplined their own communicants. However, any person or group outside the Church, or cast out of the Church, had the same opportunity to flourish in their choices. The decline of Gnostic groups was chiefly due to the inability of their own message and practice to draw and keep adherents. Christianity triumphed not because of its rigid administrative or theological systems, but because it served the needs and hopes of many who were willing to make the costly commitment to the apostolic gospel.

In modern democratic societies, individuals and groups have equal opportunity to promote their ideologies and practices. The promise of success is open to all. Let God's

truth be served in providing real solutions for the real problems of humanity by means of example and persuasion. In the cauldron of the current cultural war, it is no surprise that people would differ as radically as people did in the second century and still regard themselves as Christians. Some continue to teach that Jesus' transformed bodily resurrection is an unnecessary myth, despite the protestations of St. Paul (1 Corinthians, chapter 15). Others advocate same gender marriage despite the witness of the Scriptures, all of the historical wisdom and the drastic social implications. Still others have supported almost limitless destruction of the unborn as if only the will and convenience of the potential parent really counts. And many caught up in the spirit of the age, whether consciously or unconsciously, follow the post-modern message of looking for the *real* self, finding one's way, creating one's own truth, and doing one's own thing -- while still claiming to follow Christ. For such persons, the Gospel of Judas may perhaps be of considerable value. For many others, however, it is no *gospel* at all.

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The betrayal of Christ: the kiss of Judas