

The Gospel of Judas and Scripture

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I. Background

The Gospel of Judas has received a lot of attention recently, when the National Geographic Society ran an article in its magazine.¹ This society has also received the right to publish the gospel and cover it in print and on television. The Gospel of Judas is a Coptic text that was found late in the 20th century and was kept in a bank safe deposit box in Hicksville, New Jersey, for about seventeen years, because the Egyptian dealer was not able to get the money he had hoped for. When it finally was sold, it was already in a bad condition, but it is considered to be one of the most important textual finds in decades.

Although the Gospel of Judas is available for everyone only now—R. Kasser, M. Meyer, G. Wurst, and F. Gaudard have provided a translation²—it was known for centuries that this gospel had existed. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon (c. A.D. 180) mentions it in his work *Against Heresies* and attributes it to a gnostic sect. W. Schneemelcher has dealt with it in his *New Testament Apocrypha*.³

Using the radiocarbon method scholars have dated the extant copy to the period between A.D. 220 and 340. However, the original text must have been older, since Irenaeus mentions it toward the end of the second century. Probably it was written between A.D. 130 and 170. The content of the copy has not been preserved completely. Lines are missing. Nevertheless, it is possible to get an idea of what the gospel is all about.

II. Contents

The Gospel of Judas relates encounters between Jesus and the Twelve and conversations that Jesus had with Judas Iscariot. According to the introduction, the Gospel is a secret account of what Jesus shared with Judas three days before Passover. Jesus explains both a vision that the Twelve had concerning the temple and the priesthood and a vision that Judas had dealing with cosmology/creation. The gospel ends with the betrayal of Judas.

The Gospel of Judas seems to have a kind of mystical aura. It is said that Jesus oftentimes appeared among the disciples as a child. Judas confesses that Jesus is from the immortal area or kingdom of Barbelo. God is the Self-Generated One. In addition, there are twelve aeons, seventy-two aeons, seventy-two luminaries and seventy-two heavens, three hundred sixty luminaries, and millions of angels.

Jesus laughs at the prayer of the Twelve. Repeatedly he talks about their god, in whom they believe, as distancing himself from them, although he has called them to be his disciples. In other words, this gnostic Jesus seems to reject the God of the Old Testament. In a vision the Twelve see the temple and twelve immoral and vicious priests. Jesus tells them that they are these priests leading people astray as ministers of error.

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is found in the document. The doctrine of creation is quite different from the biblical teaching. The divine Self-Generated One came forth from a cloud. Other beings emerged from other clouds. Not only are there aeons and other creatures, but the activity of creating beings is not restricted to God. The luminaries are created, and yet they make other luminaries to appear. The angel Nebro created six angels as his assistants, among them Saklas who in turn addressed other angels saying that they should create a human being “after the image [the image is not identified].” So Adam and Eve were created. Eve in the cloud was named Zoe, which means life.

However, most important is the role of Judas. In a vision he sees that the Twelve were stoning and persecuting him. Jesus tells him that he would be cursed by other generations and yet would one day rule over them. Judas would exceed all others. So Judas betrays Jesus and does him a favor. “The key passage comes when Jesus tells Judas: ‘You will sacrifice the man that clothes me.’ In plain English, or Coptic,

Judas is going to kill Jesus—and thus do him a favor. ‘That really isn’t Jesus at all.’ says Meyer. ‘He will at last get rid of his material, physical flesh, thereby liberating the real Christ, the divine being inside.’”⁴

The gospel ends as abruptly as it began. It does not mention the death and resurrection of Jesus.

III. Evaluation

The Gospel of Judas is the product of a second century author with gnostic inclinations. It is neither an eyewitness account, nor is it written by Judas Iscariot. In contrast, the canonical gospels were written in the first century A.D., and at least two of them are attributed to eyewitnesses.

The Gospel of Judas begins very late in the life of Jesus and ends suddenly. If this were the only gospel that we have, we would know very little about Jesus, and it would be very difficult to have a personal relationship with Him. In this respect it differs completely from the canonical gospels. In the Gospel of Judas there is nothing on Jesus’ birth, baptism, and the first years of his public ministry. It mentions that Jesus did miracles but does not report a single one. It basically consists of dialogues. Apart from the section on creation no discourses such as the Sermon on the Mount, and His preaching in parables are found. Since the death and the resurrection of Jesus are not mentioned, post-Easter meetings with his disciples and His ascent to Heaven are left out too. This is understandable, because Gnostics were not much interested in the human Jesus but rather in the divine Christ (cf. 1 John 2:22; 4:1-3). There is a complete lack of future eschatology. The topic of salvation is not developed. The character of Jesus is clouded: First, we do not have enough data that would allow us to get a picture of Jesus’ character. Second, Jesus laughs repeatedly, namely at his disciples and Judas, and sometimes it seems to be a scornful laughter.

Neither does the gospel point to geographic locations in which Jesus stayed at a certain time, nor does it present chronological information that would help us to locate Him in time. Therefore, the historical information provided is minimal.

That in many respects it does not agree with the canonical gospels is evident. The bad character of the canonical gospels is the one who alone understands Jesus and brings about the desired end. The other disciples are all mistaken and worship the wrong God. When it comes to truth, not all gospels can be considered reliable and trustworthy. We have to make the decision whether or not to accept the canonical gospels as authentic and use them to determine the status of other gospels. However, not only the canonical gospels raise their voices against the authenticity and historical reliability of the Gospel of Judas; the letters of the New Testament and the witness of the Old Testament do the same. Furthermore, Scripture’s understanding of the Godhead as well as its teachings about creation, salvation, and anthropology contradict the message of the Gospel of Judas.

Unquestionably the discovery of the Gospel of Judas is an important event for scholars, as was the discovery of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. It allows us to get a clearer picture of the second century A.D. in which the orthodox church had to fight many heresies. However, it does not offer any historical or theological insights that demand a reinterpretation of Scripture.

The popular excitement about this discovery may have been fueled by Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* which claims that the truth of Jesus’ marriage has been hidden by the church throughout the centuries and has to be recovered. Supposedly, it is not to be found in the Bible but in esoteric writings which paint a different picture of Jesus, a Jesus who had a love relationship with Mary Magdalene and had a child with her. With the Gospel of Judas we have another book from the past which claims that the accounts of the canonical gospels have to be questioned and revised. For many people this is exciting just because of its novelty, or for the reason that it contradicts the position of traditional churches, or because it does not demand personal conversion and a change of one’s life style, or because it fits the present climate of syncretism. However, in the end the issues remain the same: (1) Is Jesus the biblical Jesus; is he the Messiah and Son of God? (2) Is the

Christian Bible reliable, and is it the Word of God? We have good reasons to answer these questions in the affirmative.

¹Andrew Cockburn, "The Judas Gospel," in *National Geographic*, May 2006, 78-95.

²http://www9.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/_pdf/GospelofJudas.pdf

³Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha, Volume 1: Gospels and Related Writings*, revised edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 386-387.

⁴Cockburn, 91.

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