

THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS: INTRODUCTION

Marvin Meyer, Ph.D.

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Marvin Meyer (Ph.D., Claremont University) is Grisct Professor of Bible and Christian Studies at Chapman University, Director of the Albert Schweitzer Institute, and Director of the Coptic Magical Texts Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity. In this article, Professor Meyer introduces us to *The Gospel of Judas* (which had been lost for 1,600 years) told from the perspective of Judas Iscariot, history's ultimate traitor. In this radical reinterpretation, Jesus asks Judas to betray him.

Judas is as ignominious as his actions. He takes blood money from the authorities for his betrayal of Jesus, and either he hangs himself (as in Matthew) or he dies in a ghastly fashion (as in Acts), falling headlong and causing his body to rip open.

Yet, even in the New Testament, there is something captivating about Judas Iscariot. The account of Judas betraying Jesus remains a story of great power and poignancy: Jesus is handed over by one of his closest friends. Furthermore, in the New Testament gospels, there are hints of a more favorable figure of Judas Iscariot. Judas is part of the inner circle of disciples of Jesus, and according to the Gospel of John, Judas acts as the treasurer of the group and is entrusted with whatever funds Jesus and the disciples might have had. At the Last Supper, Jesus himself tells Judas to do what he has to do and to do it quickly. Judas kisses Jesus in the garden, with a form of greeting still used today between friends throughout the Middle East. Wasn't all this part of the divine plan, according to the New Testament—that Jesus should die for the sins of people and rise from the dead on the third day? Without Judas and his kiss, would the crucifixion and resurrection ever have taken place?

Over the years the sands of Egypt have surrendered countless treasures and archaeological wonders, and now they have yielded another spectacular find—the Gospel of Judas, recently discovered and published for the first time in 2006.

The very title of the text, the Gospel of Judas—Judas Iscariot—is shocking. In the New Testament gospels and most of the Christian tradition, Judas Iscariot is portrayed as the quintessential traitor, the betrayer of Jesus, who turns his master in to the Roman authorities. According to these accounts, there is little that is apparent in his character that could connect him with the gospel, or “good news,” of Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, it is said that Satan enters into Judas and drives him to his despicable deed, and in the Gospel of John, Jesus addresses the twelve disciples and says that one of them, Judas, is a devil. The end of

The enigma of Judas Iscariot has been explored by many who have wondered about Judas's character and motivation. Modern literature and academic scholarship are rich with discussions of Judas, including Jorge

Luis Borges's *Three Versions of Judas*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Hans-Josef Klauck's *Judas: Ein Jünger des Herrn*, William Klassen's *Judas: Betrayor or Friend of Jesus?*, Hyam Maccoby's *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil*, and Marcel Pagnol's play, *Judas*. In the rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Judas Iscariot nearly steals the show, and his presence and music probed a more sympathetic view of the depth of his devotion to Jesus. In the song "With God on Our Side," Bob Dylan sings of Judas:

*You'll have to decide
Whether Judas Iscariot
Had God on his side.*

The Judas Iscariot of the Gospel of Judas is the one who betrays Jesus, but he is simultaneously the protagonist of the gospel. He says to Jesus, "I know who you are and where you have come from. You have come from the immortal aeon of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you." In the spiritual world of the Gospel of Judas, to confess that Jesus is from "the immortal aeon of Barbelo" is to confess that he is a divine being, and to declare the ineffability of the name of the one who sent Jesus is to profess that the true God is the infinite Spirit of the universe. Unlike the other disciples, who misunderstand Jesus and cannot bear to stand before his face, Judas understands who Jesus is, takes his place before him, and learns from him. In the end, Judas hands Jesus over in the Gospel of Judas, but he does so knowingly, after being fully informed by Jesus. Jesus says to Judas, with reference to the other disciples, "You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man who bears me." According to the Gospel of Judas, Jesus is a savior not because of the mortal flesh that he wears but because he can reveal the soul or spiritual person who is within, and the true home of Jesus is not this imperfect world below but the divine world of light and life. For Jesus in the Gospel of Judas, death is no tragedy,

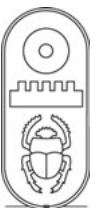
nor is it an evil necessary to bring about the forgiveness of sins. As a result, the act of Judas handing Jesus over to be crucified in the Gospel of Judas loses a great deal of the negative meaning and significance ordinarily associated with it.

Unlike the New Testament gospels, the Jesus of the Gospel of Judas laughs a great deal, and part of that laughter is directed toward the foibles of the disciples and the absurdities in human life. Death, as the exit from the absurdity of physical existence, is not to be feared or dreaded. Far from being an occasion of sadness, death is the means by which Jesus is liberated from the flesh in order that he might return to his heavenly home. Jesus will be handed over by Judas, but this will provide the occasion for Jesus to discard his body and free his inner self, the divine self. No wonder Jesus laughs.

This perspective of the Gospel of Judas is different in a number of respects from that of the New Testament gospels. During the formative period of the Christian church, numerous gospels were composed in addition to the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Among the other gospels that have survived, whole or in part, are the Gospel of Truth and the Gospels of Thomas, Peter, Philip, Mary, the Ebionites, the Nazoreans, the Hebrews, and the Egyptians, to name a few, and these gospels demonstrate the rich diversity of perspectives within early Christianity. The Gospel of Judas is yet another of the gospels written by early Christians as they attempted to articulate, in one way or another, who Jesus is and how one should follow him.

The Discovery

The Gospel of Judas was discovered in the 1970s in Middle Egypt in a papyrus codex (or book), later designated Codex Tchacos. According to reports, the codex was found, with other manuscripts, in a cave that



had been used for a burial. It was apparently displayed, stolen, and later recovered and the collection of manuscripts was taken to Europe and presented to scholars with a view to a sale, though the suggested purchase price proved prohibitively high. Eventually the Gospel of Judas made its way to the United States, where it was hidden away in a safe-deposit box on Long Island for sixteen years and then was placed in a freezer by a potential buyer. By the time the codex was acquired by the Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art and the National Geographic Society, for conservation and publication, this much-abused book consisted of a mass of fragments in a box. Beginning in 2001, Rodolphe Kasser undertook—with conservator Florence Darbre and, since 2004, Gregor Wurst—the Herculean task of assembling and arranging the papyrus fragments, large and small. In time, *mirabile dictu*, the box of fragments became an ancient collection of books once again.

As preserved, Codex Tchacos is at least sixty-six pages long and contains at least four tractates:

- a version of the Letter of Peter to Philip (pages 1–9), also known from Nag Hammadi Codex VIII
- a text entitled James (pages 10–30), which is a version of the First Revelation of James from Nag Hammadi Codex V
- the Gospel of Judas (pages 33–58)
- a text provisionally entitled the Book of Allogenes (or, the Stranger, an epithet of Seth, son of Adam and Eve, in gnostic texts), previously unknown (pages 59–66).

A papyrus fragment of Codex Tchacos has also been discovered that seems to contain the page number 108, and Jean-Pierre Mahé has identified among the remaining papyrus fragments what he believes are words and phrases that come from a Coptic translation of a famous Hermetic text, *Corpus Hermeticum XIII*. Thus, Codex Tchacos may once have been a larger book

than we might have imagined, and unless any remaining papyrus fragments have turned to dust, it is conceivable that there may be more fragments, and even more pages, of the ancient collection still to be discovered.

Although the Gospel of Judas and the other texts in the codex are written in Coptic, a late form of the ancient Egyptian language, the Gospel of Judas was, without a doubt, originally composed in Greek, probably around the middle of the second century. This date becomes more secure on the basis of a statement of Irenaeus of Lyon, who refers to a Gospel of Judas in his work *Against Heresies*, written around 180. As Gregor Wurst demonstrates in his essay, the Gospel of Judas in the Codex Tchacos may now be identified as a version of the Gospel of Judas mentioned by Irenaeus and others after him. The Coptic translation of the Gospel of Judas is most likely somewhat older than the copy we find in Codex Tchacos, which probably dates to the early part of the fourth century, though the carbon-14 dating would also allow for a slightly earlier date for the codex.

The Gnostic Context

The Gospel of Judas may be classified as what is often called a gnostic gospel. Probably composed around the mid-second century, as noted, most likely on the basis of earlier ideas and sources, the Gospel of Judas represents an early form of spirituality that emphasizes *gnōsis*, or “knowledge”—mystical knowledge, knowledge of God, and the essential oneness of the self with God. This spirituality is commonly described as “gnostic,” but there was a debate in the ancient world over the use of the term, and that debate goes on to the present day among scholars. Such a direct approach to God as is to be found in gnostic spirituality requires no intermediary—after all, God is the spirit and light within. Evidence from the early church and the heresiologists (heresy hunters) within the church indicates that the priests and bishops were not pleased with these freethinking gnostics. The writings

of the heresiologists are filled with accusations that gnostics entertained evil thoughts and engaged in illicit activities. Polemics is not a pretty business, and documents with polemical intentions, such as those of the heresiologists, frequently try to discredit their opponents by raising suspicions about their thought and life. The gnostic Gospel of Judas returns the favor by accusing the leaders and members of the emerging orthodox church of all sorts of unsavory behavior. According to the Gospel of Judas, these rival Christians are simply lackeys of the God who rules this world below, and their lives reflect his disgusting ways.

The Gospel of Judas makes mention of Seth, well-known from the biblical book of Genesis, and concludes that human beings with the knowledge of God belong to the generation of Seth. This particular form of gnostic thought is often described by scholars as Sethian. In the story told in the book of Genesis, Seth, third son of Adam and Eve, was born after the tragic violence in the dysfunctional first family, which left Abel dead and Cain banished. Seth, it is suggested, represents a new beginning for humanity. To belong to the generation of Seth, then, according to the Gospel of Judas and similar Sethian books, is to be part of enlightened humanity. That is the good news of salvation in Sethian texts like the Gospel of Judas.

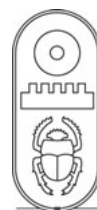
In the central part of this gospel, Jesus teaches Judas the mysteries of the universe. In the Gospel of Judas, as in other gnostic gospels, Jesus is primarily a teacher and revealer of wisdom and knowledge, not a savior who dies for the sins of the world. For gnostics, the fundamental problem in human life is not sin but ignorance, and the best way to address this problem is not through faith but through knowledge. In the Gospel of Judas, Jesus imparts to Judas—and to the readers of the gospel—the knowledge that can eradicate ignorance and lead to an awareness of oneself and God.



Page from Codex Tchacos.

This revelatory section of the Gospel of Judas, however, may present challenges to modern readers. The challenges arise chiefly because the point of view of the Sethian gnostic revelation differs substantially from the philosophy, theology, and cosmology that we have inherited within the Euro-American tradition. Rome and orthodox Christianity eventually won the day, and as Borges once noted concerning the gnostic accounts he was discussing, “Had Alexandria triumphed and not Rome, the extravagant and muddled stories that I have summarized here would be coherent, majestic, and perfectly ordinary.” The gnostics of Alexandria and Egypt did not triumph, nor did the Gospel of Judas, in the theological wars that raged during the second, third, and fourth centuries, and consequently texts like the Gospel of Judas, with their different perspectives, contain ideas that sound unusual today.

Nonetheless, the revelation that Jesus imparts to Judas in the Gospel of Judas



illustrates a theology and cosmology that are still quite sophisticated. The revelation itself contains few Christian elements, and, if scholars are correct in their understanding of the development of gnostic traditions, the roots of these ideas may go back to the first century or even before, within Jewish philosophical and gnostic circles that were open to Greco-Roman ideas. Jesus tells Judas that in the beginning there was an infinite, utterly transcendent deity, and through a complex series of emanations and creations, the heavens became filled with divine light and glory. This infinite deity is so exalted that no finite term can adequately describe the deity; even the word God, it is intimated, is insufficient and inappropriate for the deity. The world below, however, is the domain of a lower ruler, a creator God named Nebro (“Rebel”) or Yaldabaoth, who is malevolent and mean-spirited—hence the problems in our world and hence the need to listen to words of wisdom and become aware of the divine light within.

For these believers, the most profound mystery of the universe is that within some human beings is the spirit of the divine. Although we live in a flawed world that too often is the domain of darkness and death, we can transcend darkness and embrace life. We are better than this world, Jesus explains to Judas, for we belong to the world of the divine. If Jesus is the son of the divine, so also are all of us children of the divine, and we shall be enlightened.

In contrast to the New Testament gospels, Judas Iscariot is presented in an unfamiliar and rather unorthodox way in the Gospel of Judas, a way that shows what it means in this world for the wisdom and knowledge of God to be present and for a person of knowledge to be a disciple of Jesus. The Gospel of Judas describes the vicissitudes of Judas, who is opposed and persecuted but nonetheless is informed of everything by Jesus. The story of the

Gospel of Judas ends as Judas does exactly what Jesus says he will do, with the handing over of Jesus and not the crucifixion. The point of the gospel is that Jesus is a savior not because of a sacrificial death that he experiences but rather because of the wisdom and knowledge that he reveals—the very knowledge that he reveals to Judas in the Gospel of Judas.

In the biblical tradition, however, Judas—whose name has been linked to “Jew” and “Judaism”—was often portrayed chiefly as the evil Jew who turned Jesus in to be arrested and killed, and thereby the biblical figure of Judas the betrayer has fed the flames of anti-Semitism. The role of Judas in the present gospel, along with the more positive hints about the character of Judas in the New Testament gospels, may help to counteract this anti-Semitic tendency. In the Gospel of Judas, Judas Iscariot turns out to be the one disciple of Jesus who truly understands who he is, and Jesus singles him out for further discussion of the true nature of the divine, the cosmos, and salvation. Additionally, the mysteries Judas learns from Jesus are steeped in Jewish mystical lore, and the teacher of these mysteries, Jesus, is the master. The Christian Gospel of Judas is at peace with a Jewish view—an alternative Jewish view, to be sure—of gnostic thought, and Jewish gnostic thought has been baptized as Christian gnostic thought.

In this book, Jesus echoes the Platonic conviction that every person has his or her own star and that the fate of people is connected to their stars. Judas, Jesus says, also has his star. Near the conclusion of the text, just before an account of transfiguration in a luminous cloud, Jesus asks Judas to look up at the heavens and see the stars and the display of light. There are many stars in the sky, but the star of Judas is said to be special. Jesus tells Judas, “The star that leads the way is your star.”