The Mystery of the Betrayal: The Gospel of Judas

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Abstract: The Gospel of Judas has been available for scholarly research and public view for only four years. During this time, scholars have been debating whether or not Judas Iscariot is the hero of the Gospel of Judas. An agreement is yet to be made. Some scholars argue that Judas is rehabilitated, while others see a more demonic Judas than ever before. What is clear is that the Gospel of Judas is a polemical text which fights against Proto-orthodox Christianity of the third century. The Gospel of Judas may not reveal new information concerning the historical Jesus and the historical events leading up to the crucifixion, but it may help to clarify the diversity of early Christianity during this time period.

Keywords: Gospel of Judas, New Testament, Non-canonical Texts, Jesus, Gnosticism.

Introduction

The Gospel of Judas has captured the media spotlight as well as the imaginations of people, both in academic and non-academic circles. Some hoped that this lost gospel would potentially reveal the mysteries of the Christian faith and the unanswered questions of the New Testament. The reader of the Gospel of Judas is left to wonder, how could Judas deliver the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is literally the “good news” of Jesus? Was it not Judas who betrayed his master by handing him over to the Jewish authorities, as told through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? As early as the first century of the Common Era, Judas Iscariot has been portrayed as the epitome of deceit and evil through art, poetry, and perhaps even most strongly, through religious doctrine. The evidence for this is contained within the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This demonic depiction of Judas continued and even gained momentum through the medieval period, the European Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and into the twenty-first century.

The discovery of the Gospel of Judas has reopened the discussion of Christianities. What exactly was going on during these early, formative years of Christianity? Many Gnostic sects in the early centuries of the Common Era considered themselves to be “Christian.” These Christians expressed their faith in Jesus Christ by using various literary genres including apocalypses, poetry, and gospels. Many of these documents have been lost over time. This is partly due to the changing political and religious atmosphere of the fourth and fifth century. Proto-orthodox

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1 Eυαγγελίον is a Greek term, which literally means “God’s good news to humans.”
Christianity was flourishing in the Roman Empire, and heresy-hunters were seeking to obliterate any one who challenged this mode of Christianity. Gnostic-Christians were considered to be heretics and their writings were ridiculed and destroyed. In 1945, the academic world of studying Christianity was altered forever. A collection of ancient writings was discovered at this time, now known as the Nag Hammadi Codices. This has marked a new beginning in the study of Gnosticism. No longer do scholars have to rely exclusively on the testimonies given by the Church fathers; once again the Gnostics have their own voice. In the 1970s another important discovery was made in an area of Egypt called Al Minya. This small collection of ancient writings, which is now known as Codex Tchacos, contained the Gospel of Judas. Up until this point, it was thought that the Gospel of Judas was lost forever. Prior to this discovery, our only knowledge of the existence of the Gospel of Judas came from a short section of Irenaeus of Lyon’s work Against Heresies, which he wrote in about 180 CE. There has been nearly two-thousand years of scholarship done without anyone knowing much about the Gospel of Judas, not even knowing with certainty if it even existed. Following a series of trading on the antiquities market, some of which were illegal, the National Geographic gathered a team of expert scholars to work on the preservation and restoration of the Codex Tchacos. These scholars then produced an English translation and interpretation of the Gospel of Judas, released in April of 2006. This important archaeological find was at last made public by the National Geographic Society, with the release of a Television documentary and a critical edition of an English translation.

The four short years since the publication of the Gospel of Judas has been marked by a continuing debate between scholars. The Gospel of Judas seems to be a misunderstood Gospel from start to finish. What I mean by this is that not all scholars are able to come to an agreement concerning the relationship between Judas and Jesus. And more specifically, the question is: Does the Gospel of Judas redeem or condemn the figure of Judas? The main objective of this article is to further illuminate the historical context of early Christianity by exploring the characterization of Jesus, Judas, and the disciples in the Gospel of Judas.

Jesus, Judas, and the Twelve

Since April 2006, scholars hoped that the Gospel of Judas would provide new information concerning the historical Jesus and early Christianity. As research is being conducted, it is becoming more evident that this gospel will not reveal new information concerning the historical Jesus, but it does provide a plethora of knowledge about early Christianity. It is important to note that the postscript of this text indicates that it is the gospel of Judas, peuaggelion n_ioudas, meaning that it is about Judas and not written by him. If this text is to be used as a tool for discovering the historical Jesus, this detail becomes crucial. We are dealing with a text that was not originally written by Jesus, Judas, or any of the disciples. This has been proven by

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the carbon-14 dating of the Codex Tchacos, which indicates a date between 220-340 CE. Although this text may reflect an earlier manuscript, dating before 180 CE, the present copy of the Gospel of Judas is approximately one-hundred years older. This being the sole copy, there are no clues as to the type of literary development that this text may have undergone throughout this hundred year period. Scholars do not know which parts have been edited, being either added or deleted. What we do have now is a late third-century text which can be analyzed in order to give more details concerning Christianity during this time period. The Gospel of Judas reveals how this community of Gnostic-Christians understood the Eucharist, baptism, martyrs, the creation of the world, Jesus’ earthly mission, the purpose of the human soul, and life after death.

The Gospel of Judas has many of the features of both typical Coptic Gnostic literature and New Testament literature. The characterization of Jesus, Judas, and the twelve disciples is what makes the Gospel of Judas a unique Gnostic-Christian document. This gospel features Jesus in dialogue with his disciples, and privately with Judas, during the week before Passover. After Judas declares that Jesus is from the immortal aeon of Barbelo, he is singled out as the only one of the disciples who is worthy of receiving the mysteries of the Kingdom. The beginning of the Gospel of Judas states that Jesus appeared on earth to perform signs and great wonders for the salvation of humanity (33, 6-9). This seems natural and even ordinary to a modern Christian reader, since it reflects similar teachings found in the New Testament. Perhaps this is why it has been largely neglected by scholars. This is actually a very interesting statement when given a second glance. What does this mean, and how does it relate to the rest of this Gospel? Jesus does not perform the traditional healing miracles of the New Testament Gospels. Jesus does not perform great signs or wonders, such as walking on water or calming storms. When Jesus’ harsh treatment of the disciples throughout this entire gospel is considered, this statement becomes even more perplexing. How does Jesus provide salvation for humanity through his signs and miracles in this Gnostic Gospel when he clearly denies salvation to his disciples and to Judas? Later on in this gospel we read, “And [when the disciples heard] th[ese (words)], they said to him, “Lord, help us and save us” (42, 1-5). Jesus said to them, “Stop struggling with me. Each of you has his own star,” (42, 5-8). What Jesus is saying is that each of the disciples has a certain cosmic fate which cannot be altered by Jesus. This seems to be in direct conflict with what the reader is told in 33, 6-9.

Jesus in the Gospel of Judas is very different from the traditional Jesus of Christianity. Jesus laughs repeatedly in the Gospel of Judas. This is unusual behaviour compared to what is found in the canonical Gospels. April DeConick retells of her first encounter with the Gospel of Judas,

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8 Although defining salvation with the Gospel of Judas is beyond the scope of this article, I suspect that future research will be dedicated to this endeavour.
saying, “When I first read the Gospel of Judas in English translation, I didn’t like it. Jesus was rude. He laughed inappropriately. He treated his twelve disciples as enemies.” This “laughing Jesus” is usually what people find to be most striking about the character of Jesus in the Gospel of Judas. This Jesus seems to be rude to his disciples, and even mocks them with laughter. This is further supported by the Coptic translation. The original Coptic manuscript reads a3swbe which literally means “he laughed, mocked, or ridiculed.” This laughter is directed at the twelve disciples who are gathered together and offering a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread (34, 1-2). This setting means reminiscent of the last supper, and perhaps even the Christian celebration of the Eucharist. The disciples are confused by Jesus’ laughter, and ask him, “Master, why are you laughing at our prayer of thanksgiving? Or what did we do? This is what is right” (34, 4-6). The disciples are not even sure if Jesus is laughing at their prayer of thanksgiving or if it is something else that they have done or said. Jesus answers the disciples by saying to them, “I am not laughing at you. You are not doing this because of your own will but because it is through this that your God will receive thanksgiving” (34, 7-11). Jesus at this point in the text makes it clear to the disciples that there is a difference between the God whom they worship and the God who has sent Jesus. The disciples, then reply to Jesus by saying, “Master, you [...] are the son of our God” (34, 11-12). This sounds very much like the disciples in the canonical Gospels who state that Jesus is the Son of God.10 Jesus then denies the disciples salvation by saying, “Truly [I] say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me” (34, 15-17).11 It is possible from this information to speculate that this group of Gnostic-Christians did not celebrate the Eucharist. Or, if this group did celebrate the Eucharist, they want to separate their understanding of this act from that being taught by the Proto-orthodox Christian church, and perhaps even other Gnostic sects. Gnosticism, like Christianity, would have to clearly define their understanding of the Eucharist. It is not clear from the Gospel of Judas if this group totally abandoned this ritual.

Jesus only begins to laugh at the disciples when they begin to offer a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread. Before this, Jesus is not ridiculing his disciples but instead he is with them in Judea while they are practicing that which is godly.12 He then denies the disciples salvation by claiming that none of them will ever know him, after they declare him to be the son of God. Jesus condemns two pinnacle acts of the Proto-orthodox Christian Church; first, the Eucharist, and secondly, the proclamation that Jesus is the Son of God. This then raises the question, are the disciples in the Gospel of Judas really the twelve disciples of the New Testament? Birger Pearson says that, “In the Gospel of Judas, “the twelve” are clearly representative symbolically of the growing ecclesiastical establishment.”13 This intuitive statement by Pearson reflects my

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10 John 1: 49; Matthew 14:33

11 This group of disciples does include Judas.

12 This is based on the author’s translation of: auw a34wpe 6n-5oudaia 4ane3maqthhs nou6-ooou a36e eroou eu6moos eusoo6y6- eur-gumnaizz etmn-tnoyyte ntepe32w4t ene3maqthhs eusooou6 eu6moos eur-euxaristi e’npartos a3swbe

And he was in Judea with his disciples. He found them sitting, gathered and practicing that which is godly. When he saw his disciples sitting, gathered and offering a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread, he laughed (33, 22-34, 1-3).

own hypothesis that the twelve disciples represent apostolic Christianity, and do not reflect hostility towards the original disciples. What is being fought against is the Proto-orthodox Christian church, what would become the Roman Catholic Church. None of the disciples, except for Judas, are named in this gospel account. This detail is very important. The author of the Gospel of Judas does not single out any of the other disciples, such Peter, Philip, Matthew, or James, as acting in defiance against Jesus’ teachings. The disciples always act as a group, and Jesus addresses them as them as a group.

Judas steps onto the scene after Jesus asks his disciples to clearly state who he is, although it seems as though he was always present but was included in the group simply addressed as “the disciples.” The disciples say that they are strong enough, but then are unable to stand before Jesus and declare who he is. All fail, except for Judas. Judas separates himself from the other disciples and stands before Jesus, but looks away from his eyes, and says, “I know who you are 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” (35). Judas is then taken aside by Jesus and given secret teachings. “And knowing that he (Judas) was reflecting upon the rest (of the things) that are exalted, Jesus said to him, “Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom, not so that you will go there, but you will grieve a great deal” (35, 21-27).” Jesus tells Judas in a rather direct manner that he will not be going to the kingdom. This is a condemnation of Judas, and not redemption of his soul. Some scholars have missed this negative portrayal of Judas, and instead see Judas as being rescued by Jesus. In the book The Lost Gospel of Judas: Separating Fact from Fiction, authors Porter and Heath state:

“Jesus here is giving instructions to Judas explicitly to help him in his crucifixion. Here the crucifixion is seen, not as the betrayal of the son of man into the hands of sinners, but as the well thought out and orchestrated act of one who is being rescued and released from the inhibitions and constraints of earthly existence for a nobler heavenly calling. Judas is called upon to play an important role in this process. Rather than being the cursed betrayer of Jesus, Judas is here seen as the necessary functionary in the grand plan.”

Similarly, Birger A. Pearson states in his book, Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature, that:

“In the Gospel of Judas, the twelve disciples as a group are ridiculed as servants of Saklas, whereas Judas is distinguished from them as “the thirteenth.” The text includes a vision that Judas reports to Jesus in which it is prophesied that Judas will be persecuted by “the twelve.” Jesus assures him that he will prevail in the end (44-47). Following the lengthy revelation by Jesus, Judas asks Jesus about “those who have been baptized in your name.” Jesus replies that they are really offering sacrifices to Saklas. “But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me” (56). Judas is told that he will help Jesus’ soul

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escape from his mortal body by handing him over to the authorities, who will crucify the mortal body.”

These three scholars have found a redeeming quality within the character of Judas. Later on the text, however, the reader is again told that Judas is not a part of the holy generation and therefore will not go to the kingdom. “Jesus answered and said, “You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations, and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they <will…> to you, and you will not ascend on high to the holy generation” (46, 18-25). In addition to this, revelations are not exclusive to Judas. Although he is taken aside by Jesus and given secret knowledge, this is not the only teaching that Jesus gave. The reader is informed in the beginning of this gospel that Jesus revealed special teachings to all of his disciples. Section 33, 15-18 reads, “He began to speak with them about the mysteries of beyond the world and what would take place at the end.”

**Baptism: A Sacred Christian and Gnostic Ritual**

Baptism in the *Gospel of Judas* is treated differently than in the New Testament. For example, Acts 2:38 retells of Peter addressing a crowd of people in Jerusalem. It is here that Peter says to the crowd, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” The practice of baptism was an important aspect of early Christianity, both orthodox and Gnostic, so it is therefore not surprising that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* addresses this sacred ritual. This Gnostic-Christian community needed to define itself within the context of “Christianity.” They knew that Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist, and that it was one of the initiation rituals of the Proto-orthodox Christian church. In addition to this, baptism seems to have been an integral aspect of Sethian Gnosticism. Evidence of baptismal rituals can be found in such Nag Hammadi Codices as, *Trimorphic Protennoia*, the *Apocalypse of Adam*, and the *Apocryphon of John*. In the *Gospel of Judas*, we find the following scene:

And Judas said to Jesus, “What will those who have been baptized in your name do?” Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, this baptism […] in my name […] will destroy the entire generation of the earthly man Adam. Tomorrow they will torment the one who bears me. Truly I [say] to you, no hand of a mortal human [will] sin against me. Truly [I] say to you, Judas, those [who] offer sacrifices to Saklas [will (?) all […] upon the […] all of them […] everything that is evil. But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man who bears me.”

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15 Pearson, pp. 96-97.
16 The “them” are the disciples, since this sentence depends on the one which comes before it: “the twelve disciples were called.”
17 Acts 2:38 in NRSV
18 Almost three lines missing or difficult to read.
19 This section of the *Gospel of Judas* is from the Ohio Fragments, which were deciphered by Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst (November 2009).
Unfortunately, this section of the gospel is very fragmented. Some of the puzzle pieces are missing, but the tone of Jesus’ response seems to be negative. Jesus ridicules the baptism of the Proto-orthodox Christian church when he defines them as “sacrifices to Saklas.” Again, the unknown author of the Gospel of Judas has Jesus separate the true God from the god whom the church promotes. Does this group of Gnostic-Christians practice baptism? It is unclear from this fragmented section of the gospel if this community practiced baptism. Many scholars, including April DeConick, Birger Pearson, and Marvin Meyer, have categorized the Gospel of Judas as being Sethian. If their assumptions are correct, then it is more than likely that this community practiced baptism. It is probable that this community would practice a baptismal ritual similar to that found in Trimorphic Protennoia, the Apocalypse of Adam, and the Apocryphon of John. They would, however, use texts such as the Gospel of Judas to define their idea of baptism from that of the Christian church. Further research needs to be conducted in order to state confidently that this community was indeed Sethian. During this time period there were many different ways to understand, follow, and worship Jesus Christ. To jump to conclusions this early in research may be unwise.

Conclusion

The Gospel of Judas is a complex story of Jesus and his relationship with his disciples. It becomes even more complex when the religious atmosphere of the second and third-centuries are taken into consideration. This group of Gnostic-Christians struggled to define themselves within the contexts of Christianity and Gnosticism. They used sacred rituals, such as the Eucharist and baptism, to polemic against the Proto-orthodox Christian church and other Gnostic sects. It was also crucial for them to make a distinction between the God who sent Jesus and the one whom the disciples worshipped. We are just beginning to understand this gospel and the wealth of knowledge it has to share concerning the early history of Christianity. It must not be forgotten that although this gospel seems like a foreign stranger in comparison to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, these people were followers of Jesus. In some way, different as it may be from Christianity today, Jesus’ message spoke to them. Although this lost gospel may not reveal the historical Jesus or the “true” events leading up to the crucifixion, it has much to say about early Christianity and is therefore a valuable piece of history.

Bibliography


The recently discovered Gospel of Judas has created much controversy among scholars. While it is clear that Judas is liable for Jesus' crucifixion in this text, it is much debated whether his actions should be understood positively or negatively. This article suggests that focusing on how the Gospel of Judas evaluates the salvific meaning of Jesus' crucifixion alongside the New Testament gospels and other early Christian writings may provide a key for solving this problem. In this way, the Gospel of Judas can be seen as a rare attempt to unravel what Irenaeus aptly termed "the mystery..."