

The Gospel of Judas Iscariot

A Different View of the "Lost Apostle"
by Sir Knight John L. Cooper, III, KCT

Judas Iscariot is arguably the most maligned man in Christian history. The New Testament portrays this close confidant of Jesus, as a greedy and selfish man who sold out his Master to the authorities for thirty pieces of silver. Then, when remorse overcame him, he tried to give the money back - only to be rejected by those to whom he had betrayed Jesus. Unable to undo what he had done, he committed suicide in despair. According to the author of the Acts of the Apostles, the place where he died became known as the "Field of Blood."

That's the story we know from the New Testament. But is there another story? It turns out that there is - one that was found beneath the sands of Egypt in the 1970's. Called the "Codex Tchacos", it passed through several hands after its original discovery at Al Minya, in Middle Egypt. Found in a cave, much like the celebrated "Dead Sea Scrolls", the "gospel" was written on papyrus (a paper-like material made from reeds which grow along the Nile River), and was written in Coptic. Coptic is the descendant of the language of the Ancient Egyptians, and was that spoken in Egypt until the Arab Conquest in A.D. 641, when Arabic began to replace it. Coptic is still used today by the Christian Church of Alexandria and Egypt as a liturgical language.

By the time that scholars first had access to the Codex, it was in fragments. It took them five years to assemble the fragments, and in 2006 the public first learned of the existence of this "gospel" when National Geographic magazine made it available - in print and on the Internet. The publication of the Gospel of Judas stirred the popular imagination, and more so since Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* had sparked interest in "repressed" religious texts from the past. The Gospel of Judas seemed to add to the suspicion that what we knew of early Christianity from the New Testament might not be the whole story.

Actually the Gospel of Judas was known to exist, but all copies were thought to have perished in the early days when what became the Orthodox and Catholic Church was struggling with competing Christian movements that they labeled "heresies." The second-century Church father, Irenaeus, mentioned the "Gospel of Judas" in his work *Against Heresies* where he wrote:

"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 produced a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas." (Ireneaus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.1, See Selected References, at the end of this series).

Judas did not write the Gospel of Judas. It was written more than a century after his time, probably in Greek, by a Christian group that was struggling for its own identity against the Orthodox and Catholic Church as represented by Irenaeus. That type of Christianity eventually triumphed, but not without a prolonged fight - and perhaps not without the assistance of the Emperor Constantine who called a church council at Nicaea in A.D. 325 to resolve differences among the competing Christian movements so that he could recognize and support the one determined to be "authentic." The resulting "consensus document" became known as the Nicene Creed, and from that point on, other "Christianities" were in decline. But the Gospel of Judas comes from a time when the struggle was still going on, and that struggle is reflected in the gospel.

It may seem strange to us, as it did to Irenaeus, to call a book attributed to Judas Iscariot a "gospel." The word "gospel" in Greek means "good news," and almost all Christians, of whatever movement or persuasion, hardly thought that Judas Iscariot had anything to do with "good news" of any kind. Even the Gospel of Judas itself freely admits that Judas betrayed Jesus to the Roman authorities. If so, why did the author of the Gospel of Judas use that term, and why did the author feel the need to "set the record straight" about Judas' role in the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus?

First, the Gospel of Judas emerged from a "gnostic" Christian community. The word "gnostic" comes from the Greek word for "knowledge," and a common characteristic of "gnostic" groups was their intense interest in how an individual comes to "know" God. In the Orthodox and Catholic Church, knowledge of God in general, and of Jesus and Christianity in particular, came from the body of knowledge transmitted to the Church from the apostles through bishops who were considered to be the successors of the apostles. By the second century the Church was assembling a canon of Christian Scripture to supplement this transmitted knowledge, and soon the New Testament Canon became the norm against which to measure the received knowledge. However, this canon could only be interpreted authoritatively by the bishops and their successors in a direct line which was believed to stretch back to the original apostles.

Gnostic Christians took a different view of how knowledge of God was obtained. Theirs was a much more unstructured movement, and they believed that individual Christians could obtain knowledge of God - and sometimes of Christianity itself - by direct revelation or inspiration. They looked with suspicion on the authoritarian model of the Orthodox and Catholic Church, and trusted more in a direct inspiration, as they believed, from God. The Gospel of Judas reflects this difference of opinion. Judas Iscariot was an "anti-establishment" figure. He was the apostle who abandoned his position with the Twelve, and the gnostic community in which the Gospel of Judas was written seized upon him as an appropriate symbol of their struggle with the descendants of the apostles - the bishops. It was an "in your face" kind of thing. It was saying to their aggressive rivals that being a descendant of the apostles and claiming the sole authority to teach the "truth" about Christianity was not the only game in town. And using Judas Iscariot as the supposed "author" of this "gospel," the community in which it was written was attracting attention to

their belief that there was an alternative source of knowledge about God and about Jesus which they believed themselves to possess.

The Gospel of Judas bears little resemblance to the four gospels that we know in the New Testament. It is not the story of the life and ministry of Jesus, but is instead a theological discussion cast in the form of a story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus - a story that reflects the beliefs of a particular community that "gnosis", or knowledge about God, operates within the framework of a particular cosmology. Gnosticism, in addition to believing that an individual can "know" God directly, believed in a cosmology that held that the world as we know it was under the control of a "created" god who was lesser than God Himself, and that the purpose of obtaining "knowledge" of God was to free oneself from the control of this "god of this world" (cf. the use of "god of this world" by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:4). In the Gospel of Judas, Jesus is betrayed by Judas because that is what he was supposed to do in order to bring about the advent of the new age in which a more perfect knowledge of God would be known through Jesus.

Judas is also portrayed in this "gospel" as being the apostle closest to Jesus - one that he entrusted with "secret" knowledge about him and his purpose which the other apostles didn't truly understand. The writer has Jesus deriding the other apostles because of their "piety" - a piety which limited their ability to understand the bigger picture of Jesus' mission. To illustrate this derision, the writer has Jesus laughing at the apostles - a characteristic that is foreign to the canonical gospels.

"One day when he was with his disciples in Judea, and he found them seated and gathered together practicing their piety. When he [approached] his disciples, gathered together and seated and offering a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread, [he] laughed. [And] the disciples said to him, 'Master, why are you laughing at [our] prayer of thanksgiving? Or what did we do? He answered and said 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.' "

It must be remembered that the purpose of the writer is to explain aspects of the struggle of his community with the increasingly powerful orthodox and catholic church, rather than recounting an actual historical occurrence. The writer is having Jesus deride the "piety" of orthodox and catholic Christians (in his opinion) who are more interested in celebrating the sacraments than in actually knowing God. Readers in the second century would have easily identified the reference to a "prayer of thanksgiving over the bread" as the Eucharist. Some gnostic communities had sacraments, but many apparently did not - considering them to be "earthly" things which interfered with their more "spiritual" worship.

There is another reflection of this struggle in the Gospel of Judas - that of martyrdom. By the second century the Roman state had decided that Christianity was a dangerous and subversive movement which should be suppressed. The result of this persecution was that it was increasingly difficult to be a Christian without running afoul of the authorities and courting death - often death by degrading and

painful methods. Some of the church fathers developed a belief that martyrdom was a means not only of demonstrating that faithfulness to God might require the ultimate personal sacrifice, but that those who experienced martyrdom were greater "heroes" in the sight of God than those who escaped it. And some of the church fathers actually encouraged martyrdom as a way of becoming a "hero of the faith".

It was on this point that some of the gnostic communities disagreed strongly with the orthodox and catholic church. With their belief in a personal and mystical experience of God, many of them thought that martyrdom was foolish and unnecessary. While they did not have a problem with a Christian proclaiming his faith, and thus exposing himself to martyrdom, they took strong exception to the idea of seeking it out. Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King explain what the writer was saying:

The author of the Gospel of Judas point[s] out what he feels is a stunning contradiction: that while Christians refuse to practice sacrifice [to the Roman gods, as required by the authorities to avoid martyrdom], many of them bring sacrifice right back to the center of Christian[ity] - by insisting that Christians that die as martyrs are sacrifices pleasing to God. (Pagels and King, page 59, see Selected References, below)

In other words, Christians refused to perform the required sacrifice to the "divine genius of the Emperor" (the usual formula) or to other gods, but the church was telling them that their deaths as martyrs were a "pleasing sacrifice to God". The gnostics, as represented in the Gospel of Judas, objected to this teaching, and - along with their problem with legitimacy and authority being confined to bishops - felt that the orthodox and catholic church was on the wrong path.

There is much else in the Gospel of Judas, but for the purposes of this article, there are two items which may be of interest to contemporary Christians - and particularly Christians who are Masons and Knights Templar. First, Christian Freemasonry brings from its Masonic heritage an open attitude toward the beliefs of others not found in some Christian churches and sects today. The Order of Knights Templar is a Christian order, but we do not ask a member to belong to a specific church. The struggle for authority and legitimacy in the early church was revisited at the Protestant Reformation, and Templary is clearly on the side of multiple sources of authority and legitimacy. Just as Freemasonry "becomes the center of union, and the means of conciliating true friendship among persons that must else have remained at a perpetual distance" (Anderson's Constitutions of 1723), so Templary unites Christians of many persuasions and practices. And just as Freemasonry "oblige[s] them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves, that is, to be good men and true, or men of honour and honesty, by whatever denominations or persuasions they may be distinguished," so Templary unites Christians from a whole spectrum of beliefs and traditions.

Secondly, there are lessons to be learned from stories that are not necessarily true, but which help us understand important issues in life. The Legend of Hiram Abiff fulfills this function in Freemasonry, and in the Gospel of Judas, Judas Iscariot fulfills the function of causing us to take another look at how God can bring good out of evil. The "gospel" doesn't portray Judas as a "good" man. It portrays him as someone used by God to achieve a greater purpose. The author doesn't pretend that the Judas in his story is other than the Judas we know from other sources. But he is shown in this work to be a complex character - one whom Jesus trusted, and yet one whom Jesus knew would ultimately betray him. Even when the apostles didn't understand his mission, Jesus did. And even when Judas Iscariot didn't understand his role in the sacred drama, Jesus did. And the writer of the Gospel of Judas knew it too. At the end of the gospel he concluded:

"[And] their high priests murmured because [Jesus] had gone into the guest room for his prayer [the Upper Room at the Last Supper?]. For they were afraid of the people, since he was regarded by all as a prophet. And they approached Judas and said to him, 'What are you doing here? You are Jesus' disciple.'" And [Judas] answered them as they wished. And Judas received money and handed him over to them. "

As Christian Freemasons we know that God's plans are often not our plans - or at least not the plans we think that He should have for us. Remembering this, the "gospel" of Judas Iscariot can cause us to think anew about the meaning of God in our lives, and - from the ancient struggle with an authoritarian expression of Christianity - the value of tolerance and understanding amongst all Christians.

Selected References

The original National Geographic article, with accompanying text of the Gospel of Judas, and the history of the Codex Tchacos, can be found at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/?fs=www9.nationalgeographic.com>

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, available online in an English translation at www.gnosis.org/library/advh.1htm.)

Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity*, ©2008, ISBN 978-0-14-311316-4, page 59

Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas*, ©2006, 2008, ISBN 978-1-4262-0048-9

Sir Knight John L. Cooper, III, KCT is Past Commander of Golden State Commandery No. 16 in California. Past Grand Secretary of the Masonic Grand Lodge of California. And, a holder of the Meretorious Medal in Silver from the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons. He can be contacted at: johniiiurnfreemason@gmail.com
