

“The Betrayer Redeemed?”

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“The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover.” So begins the Gospel of Judas.

Last April just before Easter the National Geographic Society aired a television special (and has subsequently published its findings) that introduced to the public a new early Christian text. It had taken five years for the nearly disintegrated codex (Greek word for “book”), written on papyrus, to be reassembled and translated. This latest find of early Christian literature was unlike anything the scholars working to restore it had seen before. Both the opening lines and the concluding title declared it, *The Gospel of Judas*.

This left scholars and the antiquity dealers involved in the sale of the text wondering if it was indeed an authentic text or something from a much later period simply not well cared for. As Cockburn described, the authentication process was extensive and exhaustive and the conclusion is that this text along with three others found in the codex are in fact from the third century – in other words, within two to three hundred years since the life of Jesus. Also, as Cockburn points out, this text is believed to be a transcription of (a copy of) an earlier text probably written in Greek from the first or second centuries.

The most significant evidence to support this is a well-known document that mentions a gospel of Judas from around the year A.D. 180 written by a Bishop named Irenaeus, who was living in Gaul – what is known today as France and what was on the western edge of the Empire at that time.

“From that outpost of empire in Gaul,” writes Herbert Krosney in his book *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, “Irenaeus observed a Christianity that was chaotic... It was almost untamable, spreading its influence through much of the known world. A religion was in the process of being formed. Still, it had no organized church to determine, even arbitrarily, what was and was not doctrine.”

Irenaeus thought to rein in the diversity of theology and the use of the many texts that represented the divergent views and often the contradictory notions of the life and teachings of Jesus. He wrote, “This then is the order of the rule of our faith, and the foundation of the building, and the stability of our conversation...” He goes on to name the three elements of the “true” faith: the existence and omnipotence of the one true God the creator, the teachings and word of Jesus as the son of God and the Holy Spirit “through whom the prophets” spoke. His goal was to mold the varied world of the emerging Christian faith into a singular and united tradition.

Approximately fifty texts have been discovered over the last 60 – 70 years that date from the early Christian era within the first couple of centuries following the life of Jesus. In the years following Irenaeus’ efforts to narrow the definition of what made someone a follower of Jesus and his teachings, nearly all of these texts were excluded from what would become the canonized version of Holy Scripture.

“Knowing that Judas was reflecting upon something that was exalted, Jesus said to him, ‘Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom. It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal.’ [Gospel of Judas page 36.]

Bart Ehrman, chair of Religious Studies at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, states in his interview in the National Geographic television special that the

importance and influence of the newly uncovered Gospel of Judas hinges on the answer to two questions. One – Is the text a Gnostic revelation of how the world came into being and how we came to be here? Two – Is the text telling the story of Jesus through the eyes of Judas? The reality discovered, however, that it is both. It is a Gnostic text and the tale of Jesus and his teachings through the perspective of Judas.

A brief explanation of Gnosticism is necessary here in order to fully understand the importance and implication of the text of Judas. Bart Ehrman writes in the companion book to the National Geographic television special *The Gospel of Judas*, “The term gnosticism comes from the Greek word, gnōsis, which means knowledge. Gnostics are those who...know secrets that can bring salvation. For a Gnostic, a person is saved not by having faith in Christ or by doing good works. Rather, a person is saved by knowing the truth...it is Christ himself who brings this secret knowledge from above.”

Gnostics believed this world was the creation of not the one true God, but instead the making of a demigod, imperfect and evil. Therefore this reality, this existence, was also evil and not of the divine world of God. It was also their belief that there are some human beings who have within them a spark of the divinity from the true God and that this divine soul-being is trapped within the material world in which humanity exists. The work for the human beings that held within them a spark of divinity (and not everyone did, the others were mere creations of the demigod) was to learn how to shed themselves of their physical body in order to return from where they came. They looked to Jesus as the emissary from the world of the true divinity to teach them the secret knowledge to do this work.

Basically the Gnostic texts such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Phillip deny any innate goodness of this world and assert that salvation comes from self-knowledge, not an external action or sacrifice of another, including Jesus. What the Gospel of Judas does is set Judas up as the only one of the Jesus' disciples who understood this truth and to whom Jesus taught these secrets.

[Gospel of Judas page 35] “When Jesus observed their lack of [understanding, he said] to them, ‘Why has this agitation led you to anger? Your god who is within you and [...] [35] have provoked you to anger [within] your souls. [Let] any one of you who is [strong enough] among human beings bring out the perfect human and stand before my face.

“They all said, ‘We have the strength.’

“But their spirits did not dare to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot. He was able to stand before him, but he could not look him in the eyes, and he turned his face away.

“Judas [said] to him, ‘I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm...and I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you.’”

But this Gnostic slant to the text is not the most controversial element found within it. What has gotten people all stirred up is that this text, told through the eyes of Judas not only indicates that Jesus passed to Judas secret teachings, but also instructed Judas to assist him in shedding his human existence. This story turns on its head that idea that Judas betrayed Jesus. In fact, Jesus specifically tells Judas, “But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” [Gospel of Judas page 56]

So what we have is new documentation that refutes long-standing religious understanding and Christian teachings. As Cockburn posed, What would Christianity be without its traitor? And that is the question in real debate. What does this ancient Gnostic text do to our understanding of Christianity, salvation and the meaning of our living in this world as well as what implications does it have on the character and role of Judas in Holy Scripture?

N.T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England, disputes in his book *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth about Christianity*, the discovery of this text as having any real influence on the modern Christian church or its members. He has several criticisms that he believes diminishes any possible transformation that Judas as a biblical character may go through in today's Christianity. He also denies any strong attraction to Gnosticism that may result in the publication of this text as anything but curiosity. He believes the message of the Gnostics is one filled with enormous despair and that the canonized Scriptures offer hope and joy and true salvation through Jesus' sacrifice of self.

Wright states, "...it is that the worldview of 'Judas' is so dark, so uncompromising, so utterly dualistic, that...the ordinary reader...is very unlikely to take it seriously. The only thing to hope for, it seems, is bodily death: is that really a message likely to appeal even to the gnostically inclined in today's world?"

He disputes other scholar's claims that the text of Judas can reform the anti-Semitic subtext of the biblical gospels, which have often been read to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus. Wright contends that this Gnostic theology worsens the case against

the Jews because it denies the legitimacy of the God of the Jews, the one who created this world.

Wright continues saying that the Gnosticism of the Gospel of Judas is so individualistic that it promotes hatred of others and expresses distaste for this world and those in it by those who have supposedly escaped it or are attempting to do so through in, Wright's mind, questionable theology.

“Accept its [Gnosticism's] proposals, and you can find ‘divinity’ within yourself. Your own deepest feelings and desires can be legitimized because, after all, if you have looked deeply within your own innermost being, what you have glimpsed is the self-authenticating spark of the divine.”

The difficulty, for us, is that our liberal religious understandings, as well as those within Hinduism and Buddhism, in fact, state that within us is something of the Divine. In his arguments, Wright presumes the innate nature of humanity is sinful and in need of Jesus' sacrifice in order to be cleansed of that sin. He believes that the hope and joy offered within the canonical Gospels is Jesus' saving power and the goodness that the one and only true God, the God of the Jews, instilled in this material world.

Wright is correct in his assertion that Gnostic texts lean toward the idea that the divinity within the individual is of utmost importance. Which can lead to a theology of self-importance and the claim of absolutes in which I know my own divinity and you, who do not have a divine spark are less than me.

To this, however, Universalists have an answer. It is not a select few who have within them something of the Divine, but all of creation because a good and loving God created this world. We would not accept as explanation for all the suffering and pain in

this world that the creator of this world must have been mischievous and evil. For Unitarian Universalists the agony of this world comes from within us as human beings. Because we are not only made of the love of God, but are also endowed with free will, which unfortunately means that we can choose to do harm rather than offer love to others.

Our first Principle declares the worth and dignity of all people, including those who do harm against us. The Lord's Prayer which many of us recite within many of our worship services here demands that we forgive those who have trespassed against us. Our Universalist heritage asserts that a God of Love would not eternally damn creation.

Another struggle beyond this question of Gnosticism is what do we do with the possibility that Judas is not the betrayer? What if he is only fulfilling prophecy?

Psalm 41: 9 "Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me." This is usually read as the prophecy of the betrayal of Jesus, which is then fulfilled by the act of betrayal by Judas.

"This is a really odd situation," writes James Robinson in his book *The Secrets of Judas*, "the Hebrew Scriptures predict what Judas will do, and Jesus knows this scripture passage quite well, but does nothing to prevent it, since it obviously is the prophesied will of God."

Robinson concludes, however, that, "although it may well strike us as a new and challenging idea, it seems that the attempt to understand Judas' betrayal, to give him the benefit of the doubt and perhaps even redeem him, has a long-standing and continuing tradition." He speaks of those scholars who point to the true definition of the Greek word "paradidomi" which gets translated as "betray," in fact, has no negative connotations of treachery associated with it. Rather the Greek term means "give over," "hand over" or

“turn in.” Robinson argues that this more neutral meaning is supported by Jesus’ own words in which he states again and again that he must go to Jerusalem to die. This leads, Robinson states, to Judas “playing an indispensable role in the divine plan, and surely he must know it.”

So it appears that redeeming Judas from the title of ultimate betrayer has been well on the way to being achieved even without the publication of this text. And as Unitarian Universalists we do not subscribe to the belief that it is necessary to accept Christ as the only way to achieve salvation. But what about the idea that we are not required to perform ‘good works’ either? Does this give us an open invitation to behave just as we please without any thought to those who might be hurt? Of course not. Though some in opposition to the Gospel of Judas believe that this Gnostic understanding is dangerous. We do not need the hope of salvation and the possibility of a heavenly realm to persuade us into acting rightly. This may sound arrogant and elitist, but we stand in a long line of tradition that says it is through our human hands that the love of God and the goodness embodied within us shall be known to the world. That this is not ours alone to possess, but that all of humanity holds within it the divinity of what might be called God.

What does this newly discovered and published text ultimately offer us as religious liberals, other than something interesting to look at? The same as any other Sacred texts, pieces of truth that it is our responsibility and task to uncover and to attribute meaning to. This text may not turn Christianity on its head or dramatically alter the lives of devout Christians or even us for that matter, but what it presents is yet another insight into humanity’s quest for meaning and purpose in a world full of mystery.