



Judas Iscariot

Was He a Good Guy
or a Bad Guy?

TBR Looks at The Judas Gospels

WAS JUDAS (YEHUDA) ISCARIOT A BETRAYER, as we usually think of him? Or was he really a true friend of Jesus, perhaps one of the three or four people Jesus could really count on? Did Jesus (Yahshua the Nazarene) assign him the extremely painful and delicate task of pretending to betray him? Does Iscariot mean “sicarii,” or assassin (terrorist; insurgent)? Was Judas a Zealot? Or does his name mean he came from the Judean town of Kerioth? Will we ever know the truth? Joining other works such as that by William Klassen on Judas, as well as a growing body of tomes about Mary Magdalene, the Apostle Thomas and others, the book promises to be fascinating to historians and others who find the early days of Christianity of interest.

BY HARRELL RHOME, M.Div., Ph.D.

Following on the heels of the literary fanfare about *The Da Vinci Code* (TBR March/April 2006), now comes *The Gospel of Judas* with similar flourish, and more than a few books sure to follow. While *The Da Vinci Code* and its predecessor, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, are largely speculative fiction, the Judas manuscript, at first glance, seems to offer more. The ancient text probably dates from c. A.D. 300 but could be older. It is written in Coptic, the script of Egypt before the Arabs came, and not in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek (it may have been translated from an even earlier Greek version that is now lost). Allegedly found more than 30 years ago, it was not made public until acquired by Frieda Tchacos Nussberger, a speculator in artifacts of various kinds, and involved in previous “shady deals” according to a New York Times News Service article.¹

“We are dealing with a looted object,” said Jane C. Waldbaum, president of the Archaeological Institute of America, a professional society. “The artifact was poorly handled for years



On the facing page, Jesus receives the “Judas kiss” in the Garden of Gethsemane—one of the most infamous moments in world history—in this vignette of a painting by the German artist, Hans Holbein. **Right:** Judas returns the 30 pieces of silver to the temple elders (see more on page 6). This scene is depicted in a classic Byzantine mosaic in one of the many Catholic churches in Ravenna. As was char-

acteristic of Byzantine art from the 6th century, the characters display little emotion. Few clues are included to indicate Judas is guilty of betraying his best friend. In contrast, Renaissance painters gave us clues as to the opposing nature of Judas by placing him alone on one side of the table at the Last Supper or giving him the most Semitic of features and darkest skin or clean shaving him etc.

because the people holding it were more concerned with making money than protecting it.”

Nussberger (who will make over \$2 million) obviously sees it differently, claiming a divine mission in “saving” the text, even going so far as to say, “I think I was chosen by Judas to rehabilitate him.”

Missing is any mention of an incident in 2001 when she was detained in Cyprus at the request of Italian officials, who wanted to question her as part of a broader investigation into antiquities that had been illegally secreted out of Italy and sold elsewhere, according to the New York Times News Service.

But regardless of any irregular dealings, the manuscript is clearly an ancient text and not a forgery, though one has to wonder a bit about all the missing fragments. The translation this writer read was commissioned by the National Geographic Society for a recent (April 2006) television special. It is rather brief, actually. It is an ancient Gnostic text, and certainly not in harmony with the accepted four gospels of the New Testament. Gnostics, however, should not be scorned and disrespected. They were among the earliest of Christians, but their influence on the emerging church ended when the Romans took over and began to solidify and codify the Christian faith to conform to their model. One of the best sources is *Middle Ages Revisited* by Alexander Del Mar, 1899.

Del Mar illustrates how the old Roman state religion was grafted onto Christianity, and was totally intolerant of any divisiveness in doctrine. Just as an example, the priests of the Roman state religion were mass ordained as Catholic priests, the ancient pagan temples rededicated as churches, and the Roman

household deities (*lares* and *penates*) and other pagan figures were recreated as saints. Additionally many manuscripts were destroyed, especially when they conflicted with what was becoming the Roman version of Christianity. Most of the Gnostic manuscripts were lost, but some began to surface centuries later. Several works contain some of these lost books, including *The Secret Gospels* by R. Joseph Hoffman, 1996, and *The Lost Books of the Bible*, a compendium of ancient texts published in 1926. Also of interest are the 19th-century works of Godfrey Higgins and Gerald Massey, who maintained St. Paul was a Gnostic, whose writings were later bowdlerized and altered. The greatest turnabout in understanding the ancient Gnostics came with the Nag Hamadi scrolls, found in Egypt in 1945.

Then came the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947, but the Israelis kept them under lock and key until much later. The Essenes, authors of some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, disappeared probably because they became part of Gnostic Christianity. The Nag Hamadi texts also reflect Gnostic mystical influences. Perhaps the most important Nag Hamadi text (they are all

quite fascinating) was *The Gospel of Thomas*. It is far more interesting than either the chopped-up Judas Gospel or the Leonardo fables (TBR March/April 2006). *The Gospel of Thomas* has aphorisms and stories about Jesus, but nothing at all about the birth, crucifixion or resurrection, so it is easy to see why it and other Gnostic texts were excluded from the Roman canon of scripture.

Dr. Elaine Pagels has written extensively about this early scripture, often read in ancient churches (as were several others) until forbidden by the emerging Roman hierarchy. On

*“According to some legends,
God cursed Judas and his family
to walk the Earth as vampires
until the second coming of Jesus.
This might explain the myth of
why vampires allegedly have a
terrible repugnance for silver.”*



There are many mysteries surrounding the figure

known to history as Judas Iscariot. One of the first mysteries is the origin of the name Iscariot. Many scholars claim Iscariot evolved from the word *sicarii*, a short sword used by assassins in the Judean region to kill Romans and Jewish collaborators. Bands of these assassins operating in the Galilean hills were also known as *sicarii*. But as Judas’s father was cited in one account at least as Simon of Kerioth, it seems more likely Iscariot simply means “from Kerioth.” Then there

is the mystery of Judas’s “30 pieces of silver.” (See picture at left showing Judas clutching his bag of ill-gotten booty.) In this regard there is a conflict amongst the Gospel writers. Some say Judas bought a plot of land with his 30 pieces of silver (the reward for betraying Christ), while other writers claim that he returned to the elders at the Sanhedrin and threw the money at them. At any rate, Judas, beset with remorse and guilt, hanged himself from a species of tree (*Cercis*; redbud) we know as the “Judas Tree.” Another account from the Gospels, however, claims that Judas’s entrails spilt from his abdomen. In some depictions of the suicide of Judas, Satan is seen ripping a figure from the belly of Judas. (See picture upper right, “The Tree of Judas” from Maundeville’s *Voiage and Travailles*, 1839 reprint.) At any rate, Judas remains, even after his 21st-century “facelift,” one of the most vilified figures in history.



Crucifixion in Ancient Times

Excruciating form of public execution served as Roman terror tactic

Crucifixion seems to have first begun in ancient Persia. But in ancient times there was no “standard” method of crucifixion. It would be reasonable to suppose that almost every conceivable method of hanging a victim up to die in public was attempted at one time or another. Indeed, the ancients made little distinction between what we would call crucifixion and impalement. An important part of the crucifixion idea was to exhibit the victim, so in ancient Rome, for example, it was normally forbidden to take down the body even after death.

Ancient civilizations connected with this savage practice include among others the Jews, the Assyrians, Germanic and Britannic tribes, the Kelts, the Greeks (after Alexander the Great), the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians. (Alexander once crucified a general who disagreed with his campaign plans.)

Crucifixion’s purpose was simply to provide a painful, gruesome and public death. The victim was typically tied or nailed to a large wooden cross and left to hang there until dead.

In popular depictions of crucifixion, derived from a literal reading of the description in the book of John, of Jesus’s wounds

being “in the hands,” the victim is described as supported only by nails driven through the feet and hands. However, the flesh of the hands cannot support a person’s body weight. Some other means must have been used to support most of the weight, such as tying the wrists to the crossbeam.

Another possibility is that the nails were inserted just above the wrist, between the two bones of the forearm. The Bible word translated as “hands” may have in fact included everything below the mid-forearm.

A common prelude was scourging, which would cause the victim to lose a large amount of blood and approach a state of shock. The victim was usually stripped naked. If death did not come from asphyxiation, it could result from physical shock, dehydration and exhaustion.

Death could come in hours or days, depending on exact methods, the health of the person crucified and environment. Frequently the intent was to prolong the agony as long as possible. At other times, Roman executioners were said to break a victim’s legs, after he had hung for some time, in order to hasten his death. Deprived of support and unable to lift himself, the victim would die within a few minutes.

another front, is the New Testament “anti-Semitic” (anti-Judaic is a more accurate term) as claimed by some? In a very general sense, that could be true. The early church certainly had to cope with the fact that more than 99% of Judaists (the proper English word for a practitioner of Judaism), then and now, rejected the revelation of the Christ. The Gnostics became unwelcome as well, but they were, at first at least, within the “family.” Then they became “problem children” as they directly challenged what was becoming Catholic orthodoxy, so the rapidly growing “gentile” church spurned them as well.

The language and the concepts presented in the Judas document are clearly Gnostic, and Gnostic Christians, especially the Cainite sect, later recognized Judas as a saint. Furthermore, the Coptic Church also did a bit of early biblical Revisionism by recognizing Pontius Pilate as a saint because of his role in the divine story, but never went so far as rehabilitating the figure of Judas. Some modern-day New Age writings, such as the voluminous Phoenix Journals, maintain that Judas was really a close friend of Jesus, and that there was more than one Judas, the “bad” one and the “good” one.

The name “Judas” (Yehuda) like “Jesus” (Yahshua), was common back in those days. This may offend some Christians, but if one wants to be logical in the matter, it is easy to see that both Pilate and Judas are crucial to the crucifixion. And without the crucifixion we could not have the resurrection. But this story has likely been altered by the ubiquitous Powers That Be, and even if it weren’t, “real history” is always elusive and filled with gray areas.

“History is a fragile thing. It can be lost, destroyed, altered

by interpretation, or deliberately suppressed. Most often, it is simply misremembered. Try reminiscing with an old friend about bygone days, and you’ll find that historical accuracy is doubtful, even for relatively recent personal events.” —Rice University Historical Society.

Judas is a truly intriguing topic. Following is my brief commentary, a bit of biblical Revisionism, not based on Gnostic or Essene texts, but on the Gospel of St. Luke, and one of my favorite New Testament passages. I was disappointed that Mel Gibson did not use it in his movie about the Passion, but readers can deduce this for themselves, as Mr. Gibson made the traditional Judas a main part of his plot. As to the exact role of Judas in the demise of Jesus, it seems unlikely that the temple police would have needed any help at all in identifying Jesus, a key element in the traditional story with the famous “kiss of death” and 30 pieces of silver.

Not only did thousands of people see Jesus as he entered the city on Palm Sunday, he surely must have been under surveillance by the Judaic authorities after he assaulted the money-changers in the temple. Also, even though Jerusalem was a major city back then, the population was actually small by modern standards. Like in a lot of smaller places today, everyone knows everyone else, or at least knows of them. I’ll wager this was true in old Jerusalem as well, especially among the various cliques centered around the temple. But more importantly, the words of Jesus give credence to this.

In Luke 22:52ff, when the temple police arrive in the garden to apprehend him, we are told: “Then Jesus said to the chief priests and captains of the temple, and the elders, which were

come to Him: Be ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and staves? When I was daily with you in the temple, ye stretched forth no hands against me; but this is your hour and the power of darkness.”

So, they saw him every day or so, hence, they must have known who he was and what he looked like. It seems hard to conclude that they actually needed Judas to identify him, though it makes for an interesting literary motif. Beyond all of this, the basic message of Jesus was one of humility, patience, love and forgiveness—so why not exonerate Judas? We all sin and fall short of the mark. The other disciples, especially Peter “the rock” and supposedly the first pope, failed in their loyalties in the last days, but all were pardoned, and given major roles to play. Moreover, the Pharisaic Talmudists and temple priests always accused Jesus of unclean habits and associating with sinners, so why would not he embrace Judas, yet another “failure” loved by the Lord. The New Testament also tells us that the only unforgivable sin is blasphemy, and almost no one accuses Judas of that. Furthermore, even though several of the Gospel writers refer to Judas as a “thief” and “betrayer,” the truth is Jesus never referred to Judas in any derogatory fashion.

So, what is the real importance of the Gospel of Judas?

Basic Gnostic theology was already known from the Nag Hamadi texts and earlier finds, so the Judas manuscript does not really add much at all. The missing portions would probably be interesting, but so far, we are told that they do not exist. As a matter of fact, you could say there is another whole “banned bible” with many books that few have ever examined. There is a “Letter of Pilate to Herod,” an “Epistle of Pontius Pilate,” stories of the lives of the various Marys (especially the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene), Jesus’s childhood, and much more, most of which have little impact on present-day Christian believers. Even though the Coptic Orthodox Church recognizes St. Pontius Pilate, other than that, they too are in general harmony with both the Eastern and Western Christian communities.

Could Jesus have had an unexpectedly close relationship with Judas and Mary of Magdala? Well, it is not impossible, but the question is whether or not it makes any real difference to the basic story as in the agreed upon New Testament. I maintain that it does not—unless you want it to do so. Neither the mostly fictional Leonardo material and the more authentic Judas Gospel, nor the other Gnostic scriptures really influence basic believers anyway. Is the whole issue a plot to undermine and destroy Christianity as certain fundamentalists maintain? Again, the answer is yes, but this is nothing new, and has been with us since the beginning.

The books of “the other bible” illustrate that Christianity has always had many variants, just as it does today, and Gnosticism is still alive and well. As a wise person once said, the more things change, the more they seem to remain the same. At some point, serious believers must decide where to place their faith. So, enjoy *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Gospel of Judas* all you want. There is nothing really new in either one that detracts from the basic Christian message, unless you want it to do so. ❖

ENDNOTE:

¹“Judas Backers Deny Critics Three Times,” Barry Meier and John Noble Wilford, New York Times News Service, April 13, 2006.



Some scholars speculate that Judas, who favored a military messiah, was disillusioned with Jesus’s message of forgiveness for one’s enemies and his unwillingness to overthrow the occupiers. After Jesus entered Jerusalem on Passover, rather than striking down the Romans, Jesus turned his ire on “fellow” Jews—the moneychangers—(above) who he believed had defiled the holy temple by turning it into a smelly, bloody, raucous place of profit and sin. Later, at the Last Supper, Jesus announced he was going to sacrifice himself and that the Romans would, in essence, torture and kill him. This made no sense to Judas, who would have expected the true messiah to kill the enemies of the Jews by the hand of God. This all may have led Judas to force the issue, expecting Jesus to lead his people to victory, rather than allow himself to be crucified.

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