

The Gospel of Judas

Intro: The media has caused quite a stir with the recent coverage the discovery of the “Gospel of Judas”. One might get the impression from some circles that the discovery of this document might radically change our views of Christianity. For example, this gospel has now been published and it is described in this way by the publisher:

For 1,600 years its message lay hidden. When the bound papyrus pages of this lost gospel finally reached scholars who could unlock its meaning, they were astounded. Here was a gospel told from the perspective of Judas Iscariot, history's ultimate traitor. And far from being a villain, the Judas that emerges in its pages is a hero. This volume is the first publication of the remarkable gospel since it was condemned as heresy by early church leaders. The Gospel of Judas has been translated from its original Coptic into clear prose and is accompanied by commentary that explains its fascinating history in the context of the early church, offering a whole new way of understanding the message of Jesus Christ.

Such sensational claims easily capture the mind of uncritical thinkers who have little if any knowledge of church history and may already have some desire to distrust the reliability of the NT. And even at times believers may also be misled if attempts are not made to clarify and explain the facts about such discoveries. With that in mind, we'll explore together what is the significance of this ancient manuscript and try to answer some key questions:

What we can know about the Gospel of Judas?

Did Judas Iscariot actually write a gospel?

Is it a trustworthy account of Judas and Jesus?

Should it be added to the canon of the NT along with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?

Where did the manuscript originate and what was its purpose?

How should Christians respond to its message?

History to Recent Publication

The “Gospel of Judas” was first mentioned by 2nd century Christian leader, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, in AD 180.

Irenaeus wrote a volume called *A Refutation and Subversion of Knowledge falsely so called*, but it is generally referred to under the shorter title, *Against Heresies*. In this work, he sought to identify and describe various heresies that had existed in the first 150 years of the gospel era. He suggests that among them were numerous Gnostics who had been “*manifested like mushrooms from the ground*” (1:29:1). Among them he identified a group called the Cainites. Here is his description of them:

Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the

Sodomites, and all such persons, are related to themselves. On this account, they add, they have been assailed by the Creator, yet no one of them has suffered injury. For Sophia was in the habit of carrying off that which belonged to her from them to herself. 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 produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas. (1:31:1).

Clearly Irenaeus considered the Gospel of Judas to be a “fictitious history” which was authored by a Gnostic sect called Cainites to promote Gnostic thought.

Though Irenaeus acknowledged the existence of such a document by that name, there had never been any discovery of a manuscript that preserved the text of this so-called “gospel” until the 1970’s.

At that time a 66-page codex (book) was found in El Minya, Egypt containing several ancient works, among them a text called James (also known as First Apocalypse of James), the Letter of Peter to Philip, a fragment of a text that scholars are provisionally calling Book of Allogenes, and the only known surviving copy of the Gospel of Judas. (These works can be read at the Online Library of the Gnostic Society).

The codex passed through various antiquities dealers until it was purchased by someone in NY who placed it in a safe-deposit box for nearly 16 years during which time it deteriorated badly.

In 2001 it was purchased by a Zurich-based antiquities dealer named Frieda Tchacos. Unable to sell it she decided because it was rapidly deteriorating to transfer it to the Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art in Basel, Switzerland, in February 2001 for conservation and translation. This organization with the help of the National Geographic Society engaged a team of experts led by Professor Rodolphe Kassar to painstakingly piece together the hundreds of fragments and upon successfully assembling the various fragments translate the text from the ancient Coptic language in which it was written. This effort took over five years to complete.

So now the manuscript translation has been made public and various works connected with it have been published by National Geographic including two books, a “lost gospel” web site, a TV show, magazine coverage, a museum display in Washington, DC among the various efforts to promote the manuscript and its translation. And of course we have seen the great media attention of the past couple of weeks.

A Critical Examination of the Manuscript

What is the date of the manuscript?

The manuscript has been dated based on various kinds of evidence (radiocarbon dating, ink analysis, comparison of the handwriting with other ancient scripts, comparison of its doctrines with other ancient works) and it has been dated as having been actually penned as early as 220 but more likely around 400 AD. Some take the average of around 300 AD.

Since it is in Coptic, it is likely a copy of a Greek text that was written earlier. From Irenaeus' statement we know that the original text was composed some time before 180 AD. If I have properly understood Irenaeus, "The Gospel of Judas", would be associated with a group formed in the second half of the 2nd century. So one can only suggest a "window" of the mid to late second century as the date of the original work of which this manuscript is a copy.

What does it say?

The Gospel is not a complete manuscript. It has many missing words and phrases in the text due to deterioration and this makes it almost impossible to get the full sense of what is being said in every section. But one can read enough to get a sense of what it is about. In fact reading it, is probably the best way to see the spurious nature of the gospel and how truly outside the mainstream of God's revelation this so-called "gospel" is.

Introduction: *The document claims to be "the secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover." (Judas, Introduction) The dialogue of Jesus with the apostles and Judas is the means of conveying the principle concepts of the work. (Time will not allow thorough look at the work; but I'll share some interesting quotes).*

Confession and Promise: *In the first scene Jesus agitates the disciples by laughing at a prayer they offer at a meal and telling them that they do not know who He is. When they are unable at his challenge to stand before him, Judas finds the strength to do so and confesses, "I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you." Jesus responds, "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. For someone else will replace you, in order that the twelve [disciples] may again come to completion with their god."*

Anti-Apostle Mindset: *In scene two Jesus interpreted a vision of the apostles in which they see twelve priests standing before an altar. Jesus gives an interpretation in which he says, "Those you have seen receiving the offerings at the altar—that is who you are. That is the god you serve, and you are those twelve men you have seen. The cattle you have seen brought for*

sacrifice are the many people you lead astray [40] before that altar.

Pro-Judas Mindset: *Jesus later promises Judas in response to a dream and questions he asks: “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 curse your ascent to the holy [generation].”*

Gnostic Cosmology: *This episode continues with Jesus giving Judas a lesson in cosmology. He speaks of a “great invisible Spirit” who calls into being “a great angel, the enlightened divine Self-Generated” along with 72 aeons and their luminaries and myriads of angels. The next extended scene is about the creation of Sakla and six other angels by Nebro. This Nebro is also known as Yaldabaoth. Saklas is later said to be the creator of Adam and Eve.*

The “Hero” Judas: *Later Judas asks Jesus about those who are baptized in his name. Jesus make this promise to Judas Iscariot, “But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” This of course is the basis for the media hype about Judas betraying Jesus at his request.*

Reading the gospel confirms how foreign its concepts are to the stream of both OT and NT revelation and confirms that it is the product of a completely different worldview. But in all the challenges of understanding the text a few key concepts clearly emerge:

The cosmology of the Gospel of Judas is not anything like the Biblical account of creation where God creates the world by the power of His word directly. Instead what we have is a series of aeons, angels, and luminaries that become farther and farther removed from the “invisible spirit”. It is a world where the actual creator of the world, the demiurge, is actually evil and those who resist him are heroes!

Second we are impressed with Jesus’ hostility toward the other apostles besides Judas. Jesus laughs at them; he tells them they do not know him; they will not reign; that their god is different, etc. But Judas the betrayer is exalted to hero status and indicated to be the only one among the twelve who knew the secrets of Jesus and who was promised rule in the generation to come.

Conclusion: **There is more to be said and we’ll continue the study next week. But there are number of preliminary conclusions that are evident.**

It is at least 100 years too late to have come from Judas Iscariot.

It is clearly contradictory to the canonical NT Gospels.

Its language and concepts are clearly outside the mainstream of OT and NT revelation.

*It was known and tested by the early church and considered spurious and heretical by them.
(More to come)*