

THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS: CUNNINGLY DEvised FABLES

THE APOSTLE PETER wrote, “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” (2 Peter 1:16) The same thing cannot be said for the ones responsible for the writing and the recent worldwide promotion of the *Gospel of Judas*.

This publicity has provoked much unedifying discussion on whether Judas Iscariot has been unjustly misunderstood and misrepresented for the past 20 centuries. It suggests that he was the only disciple who truly understood Jesus, and that he betrayed Him only because he was told to do so. Isn't this change of opinion about Judas reminiscent of the serpent's ‘Yea, hath God said...?’ (Genesis 3:1)

The Real Judas

A native of Kerioth in Judea, Judas Iscariot became one of the 12 disciples of Jesus (Matthew 10:4). Although he seemed to be a follower of Jesus and was even trusted with keeping the money purse for the disciples, he displayed his unregenerate nature when he complained about the anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary of Bethany with a pound of costly spikenard. He said, “Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?” (John 12:5) His sinful motive is revealed in the next verse: “This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.”

Judas had been pilfering funds secretly from the purse that was under his charge. This covetous spirit eventually occasioned his downfall when he decided to line his pockets with a paltry 30 pieces of silver by means of an unthinkable act of selling his own Master. This was actually the price of a slave (see Matthew 26:14-16 and Exodus 21:32)!

The Lord Jesus was not unaware of his sinful acts and intentions. He already knew of this long before He went to the cross – “Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70) By referring to Judas as a devil, Jesus clearly showed the strongest disapproval of Judas' deeds, and especially of his impending act of betrayal.

At the Last Supper, the utter hopelessness of Judas was highlighted by Jesus' statement, “The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born.” (Matthew 26:24) He is even referred to in Christ's high priestly prayer as “the son of perdition,” (John 17:12) a term of doom and damnation that is reserved for only one other person in the Scriptures – the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:3)!

To his sins of stealing and covetousness, Judas added the sins of hypocrisy (Matthew 26:35; Luke 22:48) and of taking his own life. God's judgment on him became evident in the horrible end that he met (Matthew 27:5 and Acts 1:18).

The False Judas

In contrast to the above, the recently reconstructed *Gospel of Judas* gives a totally different picture of Judas Iscariot. It beatifies him as the most important and enlightened of the 12 disciples, and the one who selflessly obeyed the instructions of Jesus at great personal cost to himself. Jesus is purported to have said to him 3 days before the Last Supper, “You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generation – and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation]...But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” (Gospel of Judas, Scene 3)

The *Gospel of Judas* glorifies him as a disciple who received visions from God and much privileged information from Jesus, which was hidden from the rest of the disciples. E.g.

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...” (Scene 1)

Judas said, “Master, as you have listened to all of them, now also listen to me. For I have seen a great vision.” When Jesus heard this, he laughed and said to him, “You thirteenth spirit, why do you try so hard? But speak up, and I shall bear with you...” (Scene 3)

“Look, you have been told everything. Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. The star that leads the way is your star.” Judas lifted up his eyes and saw the luminous cloud, and he entered it. Those standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud... (Scene 3)

It is evident that the Judas Iscariot presented in the *Gospel of Judas* is not the same as the one who is presented in the Four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There will be no doubt in our minds which account is the reliable one when we make a careful comparison.

The Unreliability of the False Gospel

The Gospel of Judas has its origins in a pseudo-Christian sect called the Gnostics. By synthesizing Persian dualistic religion with Greek pagan philosophy and Christianity, they claimed to have exclusive possession of “secret mysteries” of the real truth about God. But they were not monotheists, since they believed that the God of the New Testament is good, while the God of the Old Testament is evil.

From the early days of Church history, this sect tried to infiltrate the Church with a grossly distorted view of Jesus Christ. The Gnostic Jesus was neither God nor a Saviour who died for sins, but only a bringer of higher knowledge (*gnosis*). The *Gospel of Judas* presents a laughing Jesus, and his laughter (mentioned 8 times) is an expression of scorn at the ignorance of the disciples. This is entirely unlike the Four Gospels where there is no instance of Jesus laughing. E.g.

His disciples said to him, “Lord, what is the great generation that is superior to us and holier than us,

that is not now in these realms?” When Jesus heard this, he laughed and said to them, “Why are you thinking in your hearts about the strong and holy generation? (Scene 2)

The Gnostics claimed that Jesus came to reveal the truth about our former state – a state that people had forgotten – and to release the divine spark of light which is imprisoned in matter, which was believed to be intrinsically evil. To them, “salvation” was achieved by liberating the soul from the body. This is obviously reflected in the words that Jesus allegedly spoke to Judas, praising him for his key role in liberating His trapped soul – “*But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.*” (Scene 3)

Gnosticism was soundly condemned by the Church as a heresy. Many Church Fathers wrote extensively against it, naming specific Gnostic gospels. These so-called gospels were summarily and unanimously rejected because they were utterly inconsistent with the earliest and most reliable eyewitness accounts, and because they reflected a worldview that is foreign to both Old and New Testaments. Among these rejected gospels was the *Gospel of Judas*, as mentioned in the writings of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, i.31), Epiphanius (*Heresies*, xxxviii.1) and Theodoret.

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (ca. AD 180), revealed that this spurious document – which is neither a gospel nor was it from Judas – was produced by a sect of Gnostics known as the Cainites who glorified Cain, Esau, the Sodomites, Korah, Judas Iscariot, and other villains of biblical history as enlightened heroes who valiantly kept the *gnosis* or knowledge of the truth alive!

Because it was successfully opposed by the Church, Gnosticism gradually died a natural death by the end of the 3rd century AD. It would hardly be known today apart from what was written against it, if it had not been for the discovery in 1945 of a collection of ancient Gnostic writings in the Coptic language at Nag Hamadi in Egypt.

Included in this collection was the *Gospel of Philip*, which was one of the main authorities behind Dan

Brown’s blasphemous claim in his book, *The Da Vinci Code*, that Mary Magdalene was the secret spouse of Jesus. The *Gospel of Judas* was claimed to be discovered in a cave at Muhafazat al Minya in Egypt, and was found to be written in the same Sahidic dialect of Coptic as the collection from Nag Hamadi. It is dated to about 200-300 years after the life of Jesus and is only a translation of a Greek copy which no longer exists. Its reconstructed pages are very hard to read because many lines and words are missing in the crumbling papyrus codex. There are no other copies available to supply these missing portions.

It should be quite clear to us by now that the *Gospel of Judas* is of doubtful origin, the text is incomplete, and the contents are dubious and hence, not reliable at all.

(Note: The quotations from the *Gospel of Judas* in this article are cited from an English translation that can be obtained from: <http://www9.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/document.html>)

The Reliability of the Four Gospels

In contrast to that, we find the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John surpassing the *Gospel of Judas* in every aspect of document reliability. Firstly, they provide true eyewitness accounts that were either written by a disciple of Jesus (Matthew and John) or that have the authority of His disciple (Peter for the *Gospel of Mark*, and Paul for the *Gospel of Luke*).

According to the apostle John, “*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; ...That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.*” (1 John 1:1,3)

The Four Gospels were written within the 1st century AD and are closer to the events of Jesus’ life than any other document. Although the original written texts of these gospel writers no longer exist, thousands of manuscript copies in the same New Testament Greek language exist today, besides translations in many

languages. Some Greek manuscript fragments, such as the Chester Beatty and John Rylands papyri had their origin within 40 years of the writing of the *Gospel of John*.

The matter of reliability is settled when one considers how the four gospel accounts harmonise so well with one another. There are no differences between them that cannot be reconciled. These accounts are therefore like four witnesses testifying in a court of law. Since the Scriptures teach us that, “*In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established,*” (2 Corinthians 13:1; Matthew 18:16) there can be no account of the events in the life of Christ more reliable and sure than the combined testimony of the Four Gospels!

Unlike the *Gospel of Judas*, these do not testify of a Saviour who needed to have His trapped soul liberated from His body. They testify instead to His soul reuniting with His glorified physical body in His resurrection from the dead! Therefore, the resurrection of Jesus Christ forever demolishes any credibility that the *Gospel of Judas* may claim to have.

Conclusion

There is one more point that should be mentioned here: If the secret mysteries that Jesus spoke to Judas in private were only heard by him and no one else, and Judas Iscariot probably never had the opportunity to write them all down, since he committed suicide shortly after that, how could anyone know exactly what Jesus had spoken to him and write it down in the *Gospel of Judas*?

The conclusion is therefore clear that this document comprises of nothing more than “cunningly devised fables” which we should not honour with more time spent on it than is necessary. Instead, let us take what the apostle Peter said most seriously: “*We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts*” (2 Peter 1:19)

- Pastor Charles Seet