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The “Unhistorical” Gospel of Judas

Thomas A. Wayment

Attributed to Jesus’ disciple Judas Iscariot, the Gospel of Judas (Codex Tchacos) purports to preserve a private conversation between the mortal Savior and the Apostle who would betray him. A major question arising from this recently rediscovered Gnostic gospel is whether it contains any credible historical information about Judas, Jesus, or any of Jesus’ other disciples. There are several features that can be used to assess the historical value of this document, namely the physical or external history of the document, internal literary clues or references, and comparative analysis based on the historical setting of the text.

The Physical History of the Manuscript

The Gospel of Judas was discovered nearly three decades ago, and its text, restored from thousands of fragments, was made public only recently. The Gospel of Judas, however, was not unknown to early Christians. In about AD 180, Irenaeus, a bishop of Lyons in France, denounced a Cainite Gnostic text that claimed to preserve the mystery of Christ’s betrayal.¹ These Gnostic Christians, Irenaeus reported, believed in the exalted status of Cain and were likewise eager to promote Judas, who had also sought the destruction of the mortal body of Jesus.² Irenaeus, therefore, has likely preserved the earliest known surviving reference to the Gospel of Judas.

1. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 1:358.

2. “Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons, are

Nearly two centuries later (about AD 310–403) the document came to the attention of Epiphanius of Cyprus, who likewise denounced the Gospel of Judas because it endorsed a belief that the work of Judas Iscariot helped further Christ’s mission on earth.³

Fortunately, whether Irenaeus attributed the document to the Cainites correctly or not, he does provide us with a *terminus ante quem*, a date before which the Gospel of Judas must have been written. In order to use Irenaeus’ reference to help date the Gospel of Judas, we must allow enough time for the document to be written, copied, and circulated to a fairly wide audience; therefore a date of composition in the mid-second century AD is the most appropriate. These early references show that the Gospel of Judas enjoyed fairly wide circulation. Authors writing as far away as Lyons and Cyprus had read it or at least knew about it.

The copy of the Gospel of Judas that has surfaced recently is most likely a translation in Coptic of an older Greek text. Ink analysis, as reported in *National Geographic*, was done with the intent of proving the antiquity of the manuscript, but it has very little value in determining when the manuscript was written. The variety and composition of ancient inks did not develop in a way that would permit us to distinguish between regional recipes and types.⁴ However, Greek handwriting or paleography, and to a lesser extent Coptic, can be differentiated with extreme accuracy. Therefore, the paleography of the manuscript is quite important for dating the text.⁵ Those scholars who have had the opportunity to physically examine

related to themselves. On this account, they add, they have been assailed by the Creator, yet no one of them has suffered injury. . . . 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.*” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.1; italics added.

3. Epiphanius, Panarion, 38.2.

4. Discussions of ancient inks are limited. See, for example, Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10–11. For a brief discussion of the ink analysis of the Gospel of Judas, see Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), 183–85.

5. See Colin H. Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands, 350 BC–AD 400* (New York: Clarendon, 1956); Ruth Barbour, *Greek Literary Hands, AD 400–1600* (New York: Clarendon, 1981); Guglielmo Cavallo and H. Maehler, *Greek Bookhands of the Early Byzantine Period, AD 300–800* (London: University of London, Institute of Classical Studies, 1987); Maria von Cramer, *Koptische Paläographie* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1964).

this manuscript have dated these pages, based on paleographical considerations, to the first half of the fourth century AD.⁶ Since this copy of the Gospel of Judas is a fourth-century translation of a mid-second-century Greek original, it is likely too far removed from the first century to contain historically credible information about Jesus and his disciples.

Internal Evidence

The Gospel of Judas is written as a revelation to Judas Iscariot using Gnostic terminology, such as the promise of secret teachings, the elevation of a single disciple, and the denigration of the physical body. From the surviving fragments, it is apparent that a conversation between Jesus and his disciples, particularly Judas, unifies the document. As if included as an afterthought, only a very brief narrative introduces the contents of the work by stating that Jesus came to earth and performed many miracles for the salvation of mankind. Furthermore, the gospel reports that some walked in paths of unrighteousness, and therefore Jesus called twelve disciples to administer his teachings.

The text of the Gospel of Judas implies some previous knowledge of the canonical Gospels and the interrelationships of the disciples. In this sense, the author was clearly not concerned with hiding his or her dependence upon the earlier gospel narratives. This dependence upon the canonical Gospels helps further date the text to the postcanonical period of the second century, and, therefore, underscores the fact that it is highly unlikely that the text could contain historically authentic material about Jesus or his disciples.

The Historical Context of the Gospel of Judas

Following the brief narrative introduction, the text consists mainly of a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples. The text's main purpose is to unfold that dialogue, and no evidence suggests that the author drew upon external sources in crafting this text. In other words, the text was clearly composed around a central theme—Jesus' revelation to Judas—and does not in any way focus on preserving historical reminiscences from Jesus' ministry, unless the author intended to imply that this single narrative has been preserved from an undocumented time in the Savior's ministry, a claim that appears nowhere in the text. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that this text was produced for specific purposes beyond the historical

6. Details about the dating of the manuscript are still rather sketchy, but some information can be found in Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 47–76.

preservation of Jesus' teachings and acts and should not be considered in any way a source of information about Christianity in the first century.

Ironically, some suggest that credible information about Jesus might be found in this account, yet the Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic treatise, and the historical Jesus was of little or no importance to the Gnostics.⁷ In the surviving portions of the text, Jesus instructs Judas concerning the Self-Generated One (a circumlocution for God), the archons (heavenly rulers), and the aeons (luminaries or eternal beings) of the heavenly realm. This technical terminology, derived from Gnostic speculation about the hereafter, clearly places the Gospel of Judas in time and space among the Gnostics.

This pseudo-gospel, therefore, was almost certainly composed for private consumption among a semi-isolated Gnostic community who felt little need to hide their overt Gnostic biases. The text may have been used to promote certain beliefs or ideals among a discrete Gnostic community. Unlike the historical accounts of Judas's actions in the four canonical Gospels, in this Gnostic document Judas Iscariot is simply a literary device that facilitates speculation about the hereafter. By contrast, other Gnostic Christian texts—for instance, the Gospel of Thomas—show only moderate traces of their Gnostic origins and may have been used to promote the Gnostic agenda in the larger Christian community.

Summary

Simply put, the Gospel of Judas offers no compelling claim that it might contain credible historical information. Its author(s) clearly had an agenda in writing, which was to express the hidden mystery of the heavenly realms from a Gnostic worldview. Its characters are contrived literary creations of the author, and the only implied historical information—the personal relationships of Jesus and his disciples—derives from the canonical New Testament texts.

The Gospel of Judas holds very little or no promise of revealing any new historical details about Jesus and his disciples; however, the text does reveal important clues about Gnostic Christianity in the second and third centuries. Answers to important questions such as who wrote the Gospel of Judas and who continued to use and copy it will add to our otherwise

7. For an overview of Gnostic thought see Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, ed. P. W. Coxon and K. H. Kuhn, trans. ed. R. McL. Wilson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), and Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2d ed., rev. (Boston: Beacon, 1963).

slim knowledge of Christianity's later formative period. As the other fragments of the text are gathered, assembled, and translated, perhaps more information will surface to help us trace the origins of this text. Some brief clues remain, and as this text faces careful scrutiny, some answers may emerge to the unresolved questions about its provenance.

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