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Frank F. Judd-Jr.

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Judas in the New Testament, the Restoration, and the Gospel of Judas

Frank F. Judd, Jr.

A review of information about Judas found in the New Testament and in Latter-day Saint teachings gives us a basis from which to evaluate the Gospel of Judas. The comparison demonstrates that teachings contained in the Gospel of Judas are far removed from what Latter-day Saints understand about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament and Judas

Judas was not only a general disciple of Jesus, but also one of the Twelve Apostles (Matt. 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16; Acts 1:16–17). Although most Apostles seem to have been from Galilee (Matt. 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11), Judas may have been from Judea. The name Iscariot may refer to Kerioth, a small Judean town (Josh. 15:25). As an Apostle, Judas was a member of the Savior’s inner circle of trusted “friends” (John 15:15) and therefore received the sacred ordinance of the washing of feet.

According to the Gospel of John, the negative character traits of Judas, however, were revealed well before the betrayal. When Mary, sister of Martha, anointed Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment, Judas complained: “Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?” (John 12:5). This reaction was not the result of his charitable nature, but because Judas was “a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein” (John 12:6), meaning he was the treasurer and stole from “the bag” or purse of the Apostles.

Because each Gospel writer had a different perspective of the incident and wrote with a different audience in mind, the canonical Gospels differ concerning the motivation behind the betrayal. The Gospel of Mark is the



From inside of one of the many caves located near the right bank of the Nile River, north of Al Minyh, Egypt. The Codex Tchacos was reported discovered in the late 1970s in one of these caves. The text presents an alternative view of Judas than the one preserved in the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
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most objective and gives no explanation as Judas approaches the Jewish leaders with an offer to betray Jesus, upon which they promise to pay him (Mark 14:10–11). In the Gospel of Matthew, Judas *greedily* asks the Jewish leaders what they will give him in exchange for his betrayal of Jesus, and they promise to pay him thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:14–15)—which, under the law of Moses, was the amount of damages to be paid by the owner of an ox that killed or disabled either a male or a female servant (Ex. 21:32). In the Gospel of Luke, Satan explicitly influences Judas to approach the Jewish leaders concerning the betrayal, after which they offer him money (Luke 22:3–5). And finally, in the Gospel of John, Satan’s influence leads Judas to leave the Last Supper and betray the Savior (John 13:2, 27).

After his meeting with the Jewish leaders, Judas actively sought for the right moment to betray the Savior (Matt. 26:16; Mark 14:11; Luke 22:6). The Jewish leaders “feared the people”—meaning the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem for the Passover—because of Jesus’ popularity among them (John 12:10–11). If someone had attempted to arrest Jesus in broad daylight, these Jewish multitudes would likely have caused a riot (Matt. 26:4–5; Mark 14:1–2). Thus Judas “sought opportunity to betray him unto them *in the absence of the multitude*” (Luke 22:6; italics added).

Jesus certainly knew ahead of time that Judas would betray him. On one occasion Jesus admitted to the Apostles, “Have not I chosen you twelve,

and one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70). At the Last Supper, Jesus announced that one of those at dinner would betray him (Matt. 26:21; Mark 14:18; Luke 22:21; John 13:21). The Apostles were understandably upset at this news, but did not automatically suspect Judas and were uncertain who the betrayer might be (Matt. 26:22; Mark 14:19; Luke 22:23; John 13:22). Jesus eventually identified his betrayer (Matt. 26:23; Mark 14:20; Luke 22:21; John 13:26) by handing Judas the “sop” (John 13:26), a piece of bread dipped in liquid in order to soften it and give it flavor. Jesus then said to Judas: “That thou doest, do quickly” (John 13:27). Because of the shock and commotion resulting from Jesus’ announcement, however, the Apostles did not yet understand that Judas would be the betrayer (John 13:27–28). Jesus also condemned his betrayer (Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22), saying that it would have been better if he had not been born (Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21). After Jesus and the other Apostles retired to the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas brought an armed mob and identified the Savior by means of a kiss (Matt. 26:49; Mark 14:45). When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin, he expressed deep remorse, tried to return the money, and declared, “I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood” (Matt. 27:3–4).

Both the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Acts agree that there was a place outside of Jerusalem called “the field of blood” which was associated with the death of Judas, but they differ on how Judas died and how that field received its name. In the Gospel of Matthew, when the Jewish leaders rejected Judas’s plea to return the money, Judas hung himself (Matt. 27:5). The Jewish leaders did not put the returned thirty pieces of silver in the temple treasury because, as they said, “it is the price of blood” (Matt. 27:6). So with that money they bought a field in which to bury strangers, and it was called “the field of blood” (Matt. 27:8) because it was purchased with money used to betray innocent blood. According to Luke in the book of Acts, after Judas betrayed the Savior, he purchased a field with the money he received from the Jewish leaders and while in the field he fell down and “burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18). Because of this gory incident, the field was known as “the field of blood” (Acts 1:19).

The Restoration and Judas

Sources provided by the Restoration supply additional information about Judas and the betrayal. First, according to the Joseph Smith Translation, when Jesus told Judas to do quickly what he had decided to do (John 13:27), the Savior clearly warned him: “But beware of innocent blood” (JST Mark 14:28). Because of this, Judas “turned away from him

[Jesus], and was offended because of his words” (JST Mark 14:10). Also, the JST incorporates the two accounts of Judas’s death, saying that Judas “hanged himself on a tree. And straightway he fell down, and his bowels gushed out, and he died” (JST Matt. 27:5).

The Prophet Joseph Smith, comparing Judas to apostates of his own day, echoed the teachings in the JST about the nature of and motive for the betrayal:

Judas was rebuked and immediately betrayed his Lord into the hands of His enemies, because Satan entered into him. There is a superior intelligence bestowed upon such as obey the Gospel with full purpose of heart. . . . When once that light which was in them is taken from them, they become as much darkened as they were previously enlightened, and then, no marvel, if all their power should be enlisted against the truth, and they, Judas like, seek the destruction of those who were their greatest benefactors. What nearer friend on earth, or in heaven, had Judas than the Savior? And his first object was to destroy Him.¹

Judas was not foreordained or predestined as part of his mortal mission to betray Jesus. Joseph Fielding Smith taught: “No person was foreordained or appointed to sin or to perform a mission of evil. No person is ever predestined to salvation or damnation. . . . Judas had his agency and acted upon it; no pressure was brought to bear on him to cause him to betray the Lord, but he was led by Lucifer.”²

Concerning the seriousness of Judas’s sin, some Latter-day Saint leaders have thought that Judas became a son of perdition because he committed the unpardonable sin and that he is destined to spend eternity suffering in outer darkness.³ Others, however, have interpreted the evidence differently.⁴

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 67; italics added.

2. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:61. See also James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1915), 650; and Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book, 1981), 4:15.

3. See, for example, Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 649–50; Orson F. Whitney, “Dore’s Masterpiece,” *Contributor* 4, no. 5 (February 1883): 179; and Rulon S. Wells, in *Official Report of the Seventy-Third Semiannual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1903), 30.

4. See the discussion in Rodney Turner, “Sons of Perdition,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1391–92; and Rodney Turner, “The Farewell of Jesus,” in *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 5: The Gospels*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 410 and 426–27 n. 20.

Discussions concerning this issue often begin with a revelation to Joseph Smith, which states: “All those who know my power, and have been made partakers thereof, and suffered themselves through the power of the devil to be overcome, and to deny the truth and defy my power—They are they who are the sons of perdition” (D&C 76:31–32). The Prophet taught even more explicitly concerning what level of knowledge and defiance is required to commit the unpardonable sin and the nature of such individuals:

What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin? He must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against Him. After a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost, there is no repentance for him. . . .

You cannot save such persons; *you cannot bring them to repentance*; they make open war, like the devil, and awful is the consequence.⁵

Thus, in order to commit the unpardonable sin one must receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, have a perfect experiential knowledge of God, and then come out in open rebellion against the truth. Significantly, such individuals are doomed because “you cannot bring them to repentance.”

Although Judas sinned by betraying the Savior, he does not seem to have committed the unpardonable sin according to the specific criteria taught by Joseph Smith. First, the gift of the Holy Ghost was not available to the Jewish Apostles until after the Resurrection (John 7:39, 16:7; Acts 2:1–4). Second, although Judas personally knew Jesus and participated in sacred ordinances, none of the Apostles seem to have had a perfect understanding of the Savior during his mortal ministry (Matt. 26:31; Mark 14:27; John 20:9). Lastly, in light of his remorse, Judas does not fit Joseph Smith’s description of someone who is a permanent enemy of God and cannot be brought to repentance (Matt. 27:3–5).⁶

It is true that a few scriptures use the term “son of perdition” when referring to Judas Iscariot (John 17:12; 3 Ne. 27:32). It should be noted, however, that Perdition is another name for Satan himself (D&C 76:26). Thus, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained, “[Judas] was probably not a son of perdition in the sense of one who is damned forever, but in the sense that

5. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 358; italics added.

6. Joseph F. Smith taught, “I am not sure but he [Judas] atoned for his sin before he passed into the other world. I do not know that he did not. I do not know that he did. At any rate, I believe that he lamented his sin, although he was a devil.” Joseph F. Smith, quoted in William A. Hyde, “The Son of Perdition,” *Improvement Era* 19 (March 1916), 392. On another occasion, Joseph F. Smith stated concerning Judas’ remorse: “This was not only confession of sin, but repentance of sin and atonement, too, so far as lay in his power.” Joseph F. Smith, “Editor’s Table,” *Improvement Era* 21 (June 1918), 735.

he was a son or follower of Satan in this life.”⁷ President Joseph F. Smith made the following important assessment of the status of Judas:

To my mind it strongly appears that *not one of the disciples possessed sufficient light, knowledge, or wisdom, at the time of the crucifixion, for either exaltation or condemnation*; for it was afterwards that their minds were opened to understand the scriptures, and that they were endowed with power from on high; . . .

Did Judas possess this light, this witness, this Comforter, this baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost, this endowment from on high? If he did, he received it before the betrayal, and therefore before the other eleven apostles. . . .

*Not knowing that Judas did commit the unpardonable sin; nor that he was a “son of perdition without hope” who will die the second death, nor what knowledge he possessed by which he was able to commit so great a sin, I prefer, until I know better, to take the merciful view that he may be numbered among those for whom the blessed Master prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” [Luke 23:34].*⁸

Significance

A study of the Gospel of Judas is important for Latter-day Saints for a number of reasons. First, such a study supports the Latter-day Saint understanding that the nature of the early Christian apostasy was primarily internal, rather than external. The Apostle Paul taught the Ephesian Saints, “After my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also *of your own selves shall men arise*, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29–30; italics added). Thus, apostasy is not persecution from outsiders or non-Christians, but rather it is rebellion by insiders or Christians themselves. The Prophet Joseph Smith confirmed this understanding of apostasy:

Paul said to the elders of the Church at Ephesus, after he had labored three years with them, that he knew that *some of their own number would turn away from the faith, and seek to lead away disciples after them*. . . . After his departure from the Church at Ephesus, many, *even of the elders turned away from the truth; and, what is almost always the case, sought to lead away disciples after them*.⁹

7. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1976), 1:765. See also McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 4:112–13.

8. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 433–35; italics added. See also John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 212–14.

9. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 67; italics added.

The Gospel of Judas was written by Christians who were rebelling against the mainstream Christian Church (which of course had its own problems) and were seeking to gather their own disciples away from the mother Church.¹⁰

Second, a study of the Gospel of Judas is important for Latter-day Saints because it also supports the Latter-day Saint view that a primary aspect of the early Christian apostasy was doctrinal. The Book of Mormon teaches the following concerning early Christians and the New Testament: “Because of the many plain and precious things which have been taken out of the book, which were plain unto the understanding of the children of men, . . . an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them” (1 Ne. 13:29). A careful reading of the Gospel of Judas shows that early Christians were asking important questions, such as: Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going after we die? How do we gain salvation? It also demonstrates that some doctrines were lost or distorted and that these Christians espoused ideas which diverge radically from traditional Christian views.¹¹

The Gospel of Judas contains many doctrines that are contrary to Latter-day Saint beliefs. For example, the Gospel of Judas teaches that the god whom the Apostles prayed to and worshipped was not the true God, but a lesser evil deity;¹² that the material world, including a person’s physical

10. In the Gospel of Judas, Judas, representing those who follow these Gnostic teachings, is consistently pitted against the rest of the Twelve, who represent the mainstream Church. Jesus instructs Judas to “step away from the others” (meaning the other Apostles) in order to receive the truth. Judas receives a vision in which he is persecuted severely by the other Apostles. Jesus says that although the other Apostles will replace Judas, who “will be cursed by the other generations” (non-Gnostic Christians), Judas will in fact “become the thirteenth [apostle]” and “will come to rule over them.” Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic, 2006), 23, 31–33; Codex Tchacos 35, 44, 46.

11. The Gospel of Judas teaches the basic Gnostic idea that humans came into existence through the instrumentality of lesser evil deities who fell from the divine realm; that those humans who have the spark of divinity will find salvation through the reception of the true knowledge about God and Jesus, which will allow them to escape from the prison of their physical bodies. For a good summary of this, see Bart D. Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on Its Head: The Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas,” in Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, especially 84–86.

12. In the Gospel of Judas, the Apostles think that Jesus is “the son of our god,” but Jesus informs them that they pray to their own god, that is, not the true God who is the Father of Jesus Christ. Jesus later explains that this material world, including humans, was not created by the Father of Jesus Christ, but rather by

body, is inherently evil and that we should seek permanent escape;¹³ that salvation comes by obtaining secret knowledge, not through the Atonement of Jesus Christ;¹⁴ and that the knowledge necessary for salvation is intentionally difficult to understand¹⁵ and is available to only a few chosen individuals¹⁶ and only apart from the priesthood leadership of the mainstream Church.¹⁷

Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, understand that the Apostles prayed to God the Father who is in heaven (Matt. 6:9; Col. 1:3); that the material world, especially a person's physical body, is good and is essential

lesser evil deities—including El, Nebro (or Yaldabaoth), and Saklas. Those, like the Apostles, who are baptized in Jesus' name but do not have this knowledge about the true God, actually worship the lesser evil deities and "offer sacrifices to Saklas." Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 21, 36–39, 43, Codex Tchacos 34, 50–52, 56.

13. According to the Gospel of Judas, Jesus did not really possess a physical body during mortality, but only appeared to do so, and therefore could assume any form he desired. Thus the Gospel of Judas states that Jesus "did not appear to his disciples as himself, but he was found among them as a child." Jesus explains to Judas that his betrayal will be the ultimate act of service: "You will exceed all of them [the Apostles]. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." There is no reference to a bodily resurrection in the Gospel of Judas. Since the body is evil, according to this Gnostic theology, there is no need of a resurrected body in the hereafter, for Jesus or anyone who is saved. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 20, 43 Codex Tchacos 33, 56.

14. The Gospel of Judas begins by claiming to contain "the secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot." Later, Jesus invites Judas apart to be taught things that "no person [has] ever seen." Judas will receive salvation, not because he repents of his sins through the Atonement, but because he received the secret knowledge of salvation, as Jesus said: "You have been told everything." Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 19, 33, 43; brackets in original; Codex Tchacos 33, 47, 57.

15. The secret revelation about Gnostic cosmology that Jesus explains to Judas in the Gospel of Judas would be considered extremely complex. For an excellent summary of Gnostic beliefs, see Marvin Meyer, "Judas and the Gnostic Connection," in Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 137–69.

16. The Gospel of Judas states that of the Twelve Apostles, Judas was the only one who was "able to stand before [Jesus]" in order to understand the truth about salvation—that Jesus is "from the immortal realm of Barbelo," meaning from the true God. After the disciples see a vision of the temple, representing the divine realm, Jesus explains to Judas the "mysteries of the kingdom" that "no person of mortal birth is worthy to enter the house you have seen, for that place is reserved for the holy" or those who receive this special knowledge. In the end, only Judas is worthy to enter in "the luminous cloud," which represents the exalted realm for those who receive the secret knowledge for salvation. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 22–23, 31–32, 44; Codex Tchacos 35, 45, 57.

17. See footnote 10 above.

for salvation (1 Cor. 6:19–20; D&C 93:33–34); that salvation comes only through the atonement of Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:6–11; Hel. 5:9); and that the knowledge necessary for salvation is intentionally easy to understand and is intended for and available to all people (Matt. 28:29; 1 Tim. 2:3–4; 2 Ne. 9:21–22) and provided through the appointed leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18–19; A of F 5; D&C 84:19–22).

Third, a close examination of the Gospel of Judas is important for Latter-day Saints because, although such a study can teach us much about early Christianity and the apostasy, it also cautions us to search for plain and precious truths in the standard works and the words of the living prophets, rather than in these kinds of non-canonical books. Latter-day Saint scholar Stephen E. Robinson concluded:

It needs to be pointed out forcefully that if “plain and precious truths” were removed from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, as the Latter-day Saints believe, these “plain and precious truths” are *not* preserved in the apocryphal literature either. In fact, judging strictly from the extant books, I would say that the Jewish rabbis and the Christian fathers did a pretty good job of deciding what was inspired and what was not. I do not deny that “plain and precious” truths were removed from the scripture, or even that the rabbis and the fathers were probably responsible. However, I feel it is a mistake for Latter-day Saints to assume they will find what was removed secreted among the apocryphal books. It just isn’t there! Besides, I suspect that what most of the Latter-day Saints are looking for in the apocrypha is not really the “plain and precious,” but rather the “complex and mysterious.”¹⁸

A study of the Gospel of Judas emphasizes for Latter-day Saints that these plain and precious truths are readily available in the Gospel of Jesus Christ restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith. The answers to the most important questions are found in modern scripture, especially the Book of Mormon, and in modern revelation, especially the teachings of living prophets.

18. Stephen E. Robinson, “Lying for God: The Uses of the Apocrypha,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs, Religious Studies Monograph Series, no. 13 (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 135; italics in original.

Frank F. Judd, Jr. (frank_judd@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of Ancient Scripture at BYU. He received a PhD in New Testament and Early Christianity from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.