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The Jebel Qarara hills, containing the cave where the Gospel of Judas was reported to have been found by local farmers. The dry conditions of Egypt are ideally suited for the preservation of papyrus. Ironically, the document survived nearly 1,700 years buried here but was nearly lost during a thirty-year period in the hands of antiquities dealers. The document journeyed across three continents in a remarkable odyssey that eventually brought it into the hands of scholars and preservationists, allowing the study of another text from the growing collections that constitute the New Testament apocrypha.

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The Apocryphal Judas Revisited

John W. Welch

Reading the Gospel of Judas and much that has been said about it makes one wonder, how could such a thing happen? How could anyone take the New Testament stories of Judas (of which the writer of the Gospel of Judas is clearly aware) and distort the story so diametrically? How could such a negative story be turned on its head, with evil being called good, and good being called evil?

One factor at work in the Gospel of Judas is the impelling Gnostic drive to discover new insights. Gnosticism took personal revelation to the extreme. Seeking to uncover mysterious insights or intertwined strands in the doctrines or experiences of religious figures was the daily bread of Gnostics. In this milieu, spinning gold out of Judas's straw would have been a consummate Gnostic coup.

Another factor might be the politics of exclusion. There can be no question that the author of the Gospel of Judas found himself on the outlying margins of Christianity. Indeed, there is so little in this text that is distinctively Christian, one wonders if it might have been influenced by Jewish Gnosticism (the name Judas looks a lot like the word "Jew"). In any event, the elevation of Judas at the expense of the other Apostles is clearly consistent with the general Gnostic rejection of the mainstream Christian power centers that based their authority on Peter, Paul, and other Apostles.

While we may never know precisely all the motives that led the author to cast Judas in an astonishingly favorable light, it is clear that the Gospel of Judas is not alone in fabricating a novel apocryphal story of a key New Testament figure.

Apocryphal Cousins

Filling in the gaps in traditional biblical stories, elevating the interests of one early Christian community over the others, and uncovering new or old secrets with the aim of enlarging the canonical corpus are all hallmarks of the disparate body of literature long referred to as the New Testament Apocrypha, the word *apokryphos* meaning “hidden” or “kept secret.” With this in mind, the Gospel of Judas can be well explained by positioning it alongside its apocryphal cousins. All these works are related to the books of the New Testament, but they are faint reflections of the brightness and simple clarity of the canonical texts.¹

Facing the onset of the Apostasy as early as the second century, writers of apocryphal works sought to breathe new life into old stories and to supply creative answers to questions that had arisen in some minds perhaps precisely because the New Testament gospel accounts are so brief and simple. Apocryphal accounts, like folklore in many cultural settings, tend to elaborate on the received traditions. These efforts are usually well intended, striving to edify or entertain (such as the medieval mystery plays that tell the audience what Jesus wrote in the sand or what Lazarus learned while he was dead²) or to embellish certain views or caricatures (such as in the Slavonic Josephus, where the thirty pieces of silver paid by the chief priests to Judas are transformed into thirty talents of gold or silver paid by the chief priests as a bribe to Pilate³). But despite any good intentions, the apocryphal writings are generally wrong-headed and unreliable nonetheless.

When Joseph Smith came to the Old Testament Apocrypha, thirteen ancient books bound into the Bible he was using as he produced the Joseph Smith Translation, he inquired of the Lord whether he should translate those apocryphal works. He was told that “it is not needful that the Apocrypha should be translated,” with the explanation that readers who are “enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom,” but without the Spirit, readers “cannot be benefited” (D&C 91:3, 5–6). If this principle

1. See generally, Stephen J. Patterson, “Apocrypha: New Testament Apocrypha,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:294–97.

2. Hans-Jürgen Diller, *The Middle English Mystery Play: A Study in Dramatic Speech and Form*, trans. Frances Wessels (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 102–4.

3. “The teachers of the Law were overcome with envy, and gave thirty talents to Pilate, in order that he should put him to death,” from the Slavonic Josephus, in H. St. J. Thackeray, trans., *Josephus: The Jewish War, Books 4–7* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928), 650.

applies in the case of the Old Testament Apocrypha, a person will need the Spirit to an even greater degree in sifting the chaff from the few kernels of wheat in the even more disparate and exotic New Testament Apocrypha.

Biblical Ambiguities about Judas

In many cases, the impetus behind the New Testament Apocrypha's impulse was lodged within the heart of the Christian tradition itself. With conflicts and uncertainties appearing within the sacred records, it seems almost inevitable that someone would step forward to supply the missing answers and desired resolutions. As if attempting to steady the scriptural ark, apocryphal writers often sought to pin down points more precisely where inspired scriptural writers had left those matters unexplained.

For instance, and perhaps most significantly with regard to Judas, the Greek word *paradidōmi* (and its Coptic equivalent), which is often but not always translated as “betray,” can also mean simply “to turn over,” “to commend,” or “to allow.” As is discussed in detail by William Klassen,⁴ the normal Greek word for “betray” is *prodidōmi*, used consistently and often by Josephus. But *prodidōmi* is never used in the New Testament to describe what Judas does in precipitating the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane; the New Testament consistently used *paradidōmi*. Furthermore, when Jesus is handed over to Pilate to be judged (Matt. 27:2; Mark 15:1; John 18:30) or by Pilate to be crucified (Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:15; Luke 23:25; John 19:16), the text consistently uses the same word (*paredōken*) as is used to describe Judas's act in handing Jesus over. When Paul says to husbands, “Love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25), the word again for “gave” is *paredōken*. So, this linguistic subtlety invites the question, Did Judas actually betray Jesus, or simply hand him over? Conflicts and uncertainties amidst the New Testament Gospels themselves provided fodder for grazing minds looking for lumps to chew on. In addition to the points mentioned by Frank Judd,⁵ other questions can be asked about the Judas story in the four Gospels:

Did Judas go to the chief priests “so that” he might turn Jesus over (Mark 14:10), knowing what he wanted to do but not knowing how it could be done without attracting a lot of public attention (Luke 22:6), or did he seek an opportunity to turn Jesus over only after the chief priests had offered him thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:16)?

4. William Klassen, *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 47–57.

5. See Frank F. Judd, Jr., “Judas in the New Testament, the Restoration, and the Gospel of Judas,” in this volume, 35–37.

Did Jesus give a sop of bread to Judas (John 13:26) or did Judas put his hand into the bowl with Jesus (Matt. 26:23), or was Judas the one whose hand was with Jesus “on the table” (Luke 22:21)?

Did Satan enter Judas before the Passover meal (Luke 22:3, 7) or only after Jesus gave Judas the sop (John 13:27)?

Did Judas actually kiss Jesus (Matt. 26:49; Mark 14:45), or only come up and was about to kiss him (Luke 22:47)? And why does John not mention the kiss at all?

With unanswerable questions such as these, it is easy to understand why an array of views has proliferated over the centuries about Judas. As Kim Paffenroth sensitively shows,⁶ Judas has been seen over the years as an object of curiosity, horror, hatred, admiration, or hope, an array of views that commenced early in Christian history.

Apocryphal Answers to Questions about Judas

With this background in mind, one rereads the Gospel of Judas and the New Testament apocryphal accounts about Judas with a new set of eyes. To the inevitable questions about Judas, the Apocrypha comes through with readily fabricated answers.

To the question of what was wrong with Judas, Irenaeus answered that Judas simply lacked faith. This view is found in an otherwise unknown apocryphal conversation between Jesus and Judas: “When Judas the traitor believed not, and asked: ‘How then shall these growths be accomplished by the Lord?’ The Lord said: ‘They shall see who shall come thereto.’”⁷

To the question of when Judas first was possessed by the Devil, an answer is found in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy: He was possessed by the Devil at least from childhood. As a boy, so we are told, Judas hit Jesus and “the devil [left] him in the form of a dog.”⁸

Did Judas act with premeditation? A Coptic narrative says that when Judas received the thirty pieces of silver,

6. See Kelsey D. Lambert, review of *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple*, by Kim Paffenroth, in this issue, 159–62.

7. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.33.3, in Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, corr. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 37. This text is from Lyons, France, ca. AD 175–185.

8. Arabic Gospel of the Infancy, 35 (from Syria, ca. AD 400–500), in J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 103. A Coptic narrative from Egypt in ca. AD 300–400 states that as early as the feeding of the five thousand, “Judas was the last to receive the bread and ‘had no inheritance’ in it.” Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 161.

his wife was foster-mother to the child of Joseph of Arimathaea, which was seven months old. When the money was brought into the house, the child (fell ill or would not stop crying). Joseph was summoned: the child cried out, begging him to take it away “from this evil beast, for yesterday at the ninth hour they received the price (of blood).” Joseph took the child away. Judas went to the priests. They arrested Jesus and took him to Pilate.⁹

In other words, Judas had fair warning out of the mouth of babes and thus went to the chief priests with full consciousness and premeditation.

According to the Acts of Pilate, Judas was not entirely alone to blame. Both he and his unbelieving and unhelpful wife were given a divine sign that Jesus would rise from the dead, which reinforced Judas’s decision to hang himself:

And departing to his house to make a halter of rope to hang himself, he found his wife sitting and roasting a cock on a fire of coals or in a pan before eating it: and saith to her: “Rise up, wife, and provide me a rope, for I would hang myself, as I deserve.” But his wife said to him: “Why sayest thou such things?” And Judas saith to her: “Know of a truth that I have wickedly betrayed my master Jesus to the evil-doers for Pilate to put him to death: but he will rise again on the third day, and woe unto us!” And his wife said to him: “Say not nor think not so: for as well as this cock that is roasting on the fire of coals can crow, just so well shall Jesus rise again, as thou sayest.” And immediately at her word, that cock spread his wings and crowed thrice. Then was Judas yet more convinced, and straightway made the halter of rope and hanged himself.¹⁰

According to yet another account, several other people were complicit in the scheme that led to the execution of Jesus. A late appendix to the apocryphal Acts of Pilate makes the novel claims that Judas was actually a nephew of the High Priest Caiaphas and that Jews had bribed Judas for over two years to be an inside informant. According to this story, Judas falsely blamed Jesus for stealing the law and defiling his cousin, who was a prophetess in the Temple. The tale begins by declaring that the Temple had been pillaged and defiled by Demas (one of two robbers sent to Pilate seven days before the arrest of Jesus). As a result,

Caiaphas and the multitude of the Jews had no passover but were in great grief because of the robbery of the sanctuary by the thief. And they sent for Judas Iscariot who was brother’s son to Caiaphas, and had been persuaded by the Jews to become a disciple of Jesus, not to follow

9. P. Lacau, *Fragments d’apocryphes coptes* (Cairo, 1904), in Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 163. These fragments are from Egypt, ca. AD 300–400.

10. Acts of Pilate, in James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 116. This text is from Jerusalem, ca. AD 400–500.

his teachings, but to betray him. They paid him a didrachm of gold daily; and as one of Jesus' disciples, called John, says, he had been two years with Jesus. On the third day before Jesus was taken, Judas said to the Jews: "Let us assemble a council and say that it was not the robber who took away the law, but Jesus." Nicodemus, who had the keys of the sanctuary, said "No:" for he was a truthful man. But Sarra, Caiaphas' daughter, cried out that Jesus said in public, "I can destroy the temple (etc.)". All the Jews said: "We believe you." For they held her as a prophetess. So Jesus was taken.¹¹

And what about the eternal fate of Judas? Was there any room for his repentance or any hope for him in the eternities? Not according to the Coptic book of *The Resurrection of Christ*, in which Jesus met and rejected Judas in the underworld while his body lay in the tomb. There, Jesus bound demons and broke doors, but "then he turned to Judas Iscariot and uttered a long rebuke, and described the sufferings which he must endure. Thirty names of sins are given, which are the snakes which were sent to devour him."¹²

However, according to *The Acts of Andrew and Paul*, Jesus saved Judas so that the forces of hell could not claim to be stronger than Jesus. In this text, Paul visited Judas in the underworld and learned that Judas had repented, had given back the money to the chief priests, and had found Jesus and begged his forgiveness. Jesus sent him to the desert to repent. But the devil came and threatened to swallow Judas up; in response Judas "worshipped him. Then in despair he thought to go and ask Jesus again for pardon, but [by then Jesus] had been taken away to the praetorium. So [Judas] resolved to hang himself and meet Jesus in Amente [the underworld]. Jesus came and [liberated] all the souls but [Judas's]." When the powers of death claimed that they were stronger than Jesus because he had left a soul with them, "Jesus ordered Michael to take away Judas's soul [from Amente] also, that Satan's boast might be proved vain, and [Jesus] told Judas how [Judas] had destroyed his own hopes by worshipping Satan and killing himself. Judas was then sent back [to the underworld] till the

11. *The Narrative of Joseph of Arimathaea, 1* (a text from the Pilate Cycle), in Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 219. This text comes from Jerusalem, ca. AD 400–500.

12. *The Book of Resurrection of Jesus Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle*, in Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 669. This text is from Egypt, ca. AD 400–500. "This text contains an execration against Judas Iscariot said to have been pronounced by Jesus in 'Amente,' an Egyptian mythological term for hell." It "amount[s] to an excommunicative curse." *Testament of Job*, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 1:862 n. 43d.

day of judgment.”¹³ Although Judas ultimately succumbed to the Devil, at least he had tried to repent and Jesus protected him to spite the forces of hell. This story reflects a glimmer of hope for Judas’s redemption through the grace and power of Christ.

Indeed, right within the New Testament are the seeds of a positive view of Judas’s fate. Even after the death of Judas, Peter affirmed that Judas “had obtained part of this ministry” (KJV) or that Judas “had received by lot the assignment (*klēros*) of this service (*diakonias*)” (Acts 1:17, author’s translation). The role of “becoming a guide (*hodēgou*) to the ones who took Jesus” was his calling, a fate that Peter says was prophesied concerning Judas.

Discerning between Truth and Fabrication

From all of this, it is clear that many exotic things have been said about Judas, and not only in the Gospel of Judas. The Gospel of Judas offers just one more concocted story about Judas which is no more credible than any other apocryphal tale that has been spun out about his childhood, his wife’s dead rooster, or his being bribed for two years as an undercover agent. Thus, it deserves to have no greater impact on people’s views of Jesus, Judas, or the New Testament than any other apocryphal story.¹⁴ The Gospel of Judas does not become any more persuasive simply because the text of this long-known heresy has now been unearthed.

More than ever before, as books are coming forth from antiquity, their truths and errors must be discerned through the Spirit, as Joseph Smith was instructed in Doctrine and Covenants 91:4–6. The rule that applied for the relatively tame Old Testament Apocrypha applies even more to the New Testament apocryphal accounts, including the Gospel of Judas. The spirit of discernment is of leading importance: “Wherefore, beware lest ye are deceived; and that ye may not be deceived seek ye earnestly the best gifts, always remembering for what they are given” (D&C 46:8).

Satan’s corruption of truth typically involves telling half-truths, imitating reality, hiding behind other people, and mingling the ideas of men with scripture. All of these strategies are readily apparent in the Gospel of

13. The Acts of Andrew and Paul, in Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 301–2. This text is from ca. AD 200, location uncertain.

14. On the obvious fictional character of much of the New Testament Apocrypha, see further Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry,” 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), 54–56.

Judas. This text presents several true ideas about the coming apostasy, the problem of anger, the wickedness of priests in the temple of Herod, souls rising after death, angelic visionary escorts, Judas handing Jesus over for money, and it quotes or paraphrases scripture (1 Cor. 2:9 and passages on the arrest of Jesus).¹⁵ But this text also mingles these true ideas with claims that Christ is Seth; that no mortal can associate with the generation of heaven; that the Twelve were seen leading people astray and stoning Judas; that Judas would rule over all the other generations, angels, aeons, and luminaries above; and that this world below is called “perdition.”¹⁶ Whereas true revelation sustains the divinity of Christ and is consistent with the truthfulness of the Bible and the Standard Works (Morm. 7:9), the Gospel of Judas seeks to divide that house even against itself.

In the spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ, however, answers to most of the traditional questions about Judas can be given. Satan influenced Judas to betray Jesus; Judas knew well what he was doing and acted voluntarily; Jesus’ death was part of God’s plan for the salvation of his children; and Christ had control over his life and death notwithstanding Judas’s actions.¹⁷ Judas apparently tried to repent (see Matt. 27:3), although the details of this “change of heart”¹⁸ or “remorse of conscience”¹⁹ remain unknown.

15. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2006), 21–22, 25–26, 29–30, 33–34, 45, Codex Tchacos 34–35, 38, 43, 47, 58.

16. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 38, 24–25, 27, 31, 32–37, Codex Tchacos 52, 37, 39, 44–50.

17. “Two Fates,” *Millennial Star* 64 (December 11, 1902): 798. Elder James E. Talmage has written that Judas was not “in the least degree deprived of freedom or agency in the course he followed to so execrable an end.” James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1915), 650 n. 8. See also C. Wilfred Griggs, “The Last Supper According to John,” in *From the Last Supper through the Resurrection: The Savior’s Final Hours*, ed. Richard Holzapfel and Thomas Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 136: “God’s knowledge was not a causative agent depriving Judas of the responsibility to choose freely.” See also Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 4:14, 15, 44, 129, 131; David Rolph Seely, “The Last Supper according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke,” in Holzapfel and Wayment, *From the Last Supper through the Resurrection*, 81, 113; S. Kent Brown, “The Arrest,” in *From the Last Supper through the Resurrection*, 175–76; Richard A. Holzapfel, *A Lively Hope: The Suffering, Death, Resurrection, and Exaltation of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 31, 41; and John W. Welch, “Latter-day Saint Reflections on the Trial and Death of Jesus,” *Clark Memorandum* (Fall 2000): 13.

18. Andrew Skinner, *Golgotha* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 65.

19. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 4:197–98.

Summing up this colloquium, it is clear to all that the story of Judas will continue to attract attention, for many people are drawn to catastrophes as flies are drawn to corpses. But Judas's catastrophe should not be compounded by pouring theological salt in his wounds. Victims of disasters should not be taken advantage of. Yet, in writing the Gospel of Judas someone took advantage of Judas, using him to promote certain theological and sectarian views against his will. Judas is not a willing participant in *this* situation. So, as I wonder how such a writing could come to be, I also wonder how Judas must feel to be used this way. I doubt that he recognizes much of himself in this "gospel" that bears his name. Even Judas's name can be taken in vain.

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