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Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple. by Kim Paffenroth

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Kim Paffenroth. *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple.*
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Reviewed by Kelsey D. Lambert

People are often content to label Judas Iscariot with one word—traitor, betrayer, thief, or zealot. But his motives, ambitions, and true character have been a subject for continued scholarship, commentary, imagination, and literature. This book analyzes the historical evolution of various Judas stories and interpretations to show the complexities of Judas's character and history. Published in 2001, just before the identification of the lost Gospel of Judas, this book shows the variety of views about Judas even before the Gospel of Judas came on the scene.

Paffenroth divides his book into five different views: Judas as an object of curiosity, horror, hatred, admiration, and hope. In choosing these five characteristics, Paffenroth does not offer new depictions of the apostle Judas, but instead focuses on how Judas has been portrayed by others. This approach draws the reader into each new character portrayal and leaves conclusions largely in the hands of the reader. Paffenroth has a scholarly approach, but this study is appealing to any educated person because of references to Judas in Shakespeare, Oedipus, and other classic literature.

Seeing Judas as an obscure object of curiosity, Paffenroth shows how Judas is often left out or pushed aside in the earliest available Christian texts. Due to "silence" and "ambiguity" the earliest portrayals lack "the details and embellishments of later versions" (1). In support of this theory, Paffenroth cites Paul, Mark, and early Christian artwork. In his discourses and letters on Christ's final sacrifice, Paul never mentions Judas's name or even acknowledges that there was a betrayal. Of all the Gospel writers, Mark leaves Judas's role the most ambiguous. In early Christian art, "images of Judas are not essential parts of the passion cycle until the sixth

century" (3). Paffenroth concludes that this vagueness was the catalyst for the elaborations of coming centuries.

Judas is more often seen as the arch-sinner and object of horror. These depictions of Judas arose as Christian writers tried to satisfy "moral and aesthetic sensibilities as well as [to provide] a much more powerful and memorable lesson on the results of sin" (23). Judas's role in moralistic parables on evil had its height in antiquity and the Middle Ages, although this image of him was present in the first century and has continued into modern interpretations as well. The earliest depiction of Judas in this light comes from the Gospel of Luke. Paffenroth believes that Luke villainizes Judas to such a large extent because of his audience. He has to reassure his readers and answer the theological dilemma that one of Christ's authorized disciples would have failed (18–19). Medieval passion plays, as well as Dante's *Inferno,* demonize him to the degree that Judas becomes the "worst example of the worst sin possible, betrayal" (28). Judas's name thus becomes prevalent in medieval heathen charms, curses, and popular celebrations.

Paffenroth next reviews how Judas has been seen as an object of hatred and derision. Support for this depiction is drawn from the Gospel of John. John emphasizes that Judas did not turn against the Savior, but was evil from the start. He sets him up as a villain-type, one who consistently and predictably embodies evil. This depiction soon made way for a theological form of anti-Semitism. "For Chrysostom and many Christians after him, the Jews as a people epitomize the avarice and treachery of Judas as an individual, and God has ordained and approved the punishments meted out to both" (39). The passion play at Oberammergau, Germany, evolved from having devils tearing apart Judas in medieval grotesque depictions, to blaming the death and crucifixion directly on Judas and the Jews themselves, thus "elaborating and accentuating Jewish evil as completely human but utterly and irredeemable evil" (42). As an interesting side note in this section, Paffenroth dismisses the idea that depictions of Judas with red hair denote him as Jewish and thus promote anti-Semitism. Rather, writers and artists alike began portraying Judas as a redhead to distinguish him from the other apostles and possibly to continue an "ancient and worldwide aversion to red hair" (51).

Alternatively, Judas has been seen as a tragic hero and the object of admiration and sympathy. Paffenroth speaks of historical depictions of Judas as "flawed in various ways and ending in a horrible death, but still a hero with whom we identify and whose fate fills us with sympathy, admiration, and awe at our own vulnerability before the powerful forces of fate

and God" (59). In Gnosticism, Judas is "revered as the only enlightened follower of Jesus," and in unconventional modern interpretations, he is seen as the "only obedient apostle;" an Oedipus-type "doomed to commit unspeakable acts but who paradoxically always freely chose those horrible acts;" "a nationalistic revolutionary" who became "increasingly disillusioned and hostile to Jesus" when he realized that Jesus was not going to help overthrow Roman oppression; and as a "great lover" who struggled between attachments to women and loyalty to Jesus (59–60). Paffenroth shows how Shakespeare portrays Judas as a tragic hero through references to Othello, Richard II's killer, and the king's murderer in *King John,* whose "bowels suddenly burst out" (80–81). On the one hand, Thomas DeQuincey explores the idea of Judas as a revolutionary in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, claiming that Judas was mistaken, as were many of the other disciples, about Jesus' true identity (86–88), but on the other hand, some Jewish literature makes an anti-revolutionary claim for Judas, saying instead that Jesus was the revolutionary, and they "sometimes elevate Judas as a loyal Jew who seeks to discredit and disarm the dangerous and destructive Nazarene" (92).

Finally, Judas has been portrayed as a penitent, making him an object of hope and emulation. These images of Judas see him from a divine rather than human perspective; they are the most hopeful and conclude that Judas is ultimately saved. Paffenroth's basis for this argument is the Gospel of Matthew, which replicates Mark's terse mention of Judas but adds little details that give hope for Judas's ultimate repentance. In the late second century, Origen makes a clear case for the possibility that Judas could repent and concludes optimistically that "the apostasy of Judas was not a complete apostasy" (119). His writings, coupled with Matthew's treatment, have paved the way for a tradition that believes "if Judas cannot be saved, then it is not a sign of his failure but a much more problematic sign of the failure of divine love and forgiveness" (119). These traditions often emphasize Judas's guilt and subsequent suicide in order to evoke sympathy for his situation. Dostoyevsky takes this theme in *The Brothers Karamazov* and in *Notes from Underground*. Others within this tradition focus on the "necessity of his actions" and thus elevate him to an "agent of salvation" (135).

It may be difficult for Latter-day Saints to understand how Judas could be characterized in any way as an object of hope or admiration, considering his self-condemning betrayal. Latter-day Saints usually think of Judas as an arch-sinner or perhaps as a pathetic tragic figure, yet much about him certainly remains obscure and pathetic, if not sympathetic, and thus one hesitates to make a final judgment about his ultimate doom.

In this mix, the recently discovered and translated Gospel of Judas gives us much more information about how some early Christians saw Judas as a sympathetic, positive figure. In response to this document, many readers will want to understand how various people in the past have come to view Judas's actions. To this end, Paffenroth's book offers an enlightening and helpful look at one of world's most disturbing and perplexing characters.

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