Re-examining Judas: Betrayer or Best Friend?

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Re-Examining Judas: Betrayer or Best Friend?

April 2010

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Undergraduate Senior Honors Thesis
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What’s in a Story?

Judas Iscariot is a universally recognized name. Its mention produces thoughts of a story introduced in the Crucifixion narrative of the Christian West. While in the course of history, the story appears in many forms, the overall connotation of each is negative. As Harvard Divinity School Professor and New Testament scholar Karen King suggests, “for thousands of years, Christians have pictured Judas as the reincarnation of evil.”¹ The name Judas instantly draws forth the story of his character.² Five out of five people who were asked about the name of Judas responded with an answer of the betrayer of Christ in some form. One person went as far as to say that “Judas was the man who betrayed Jesus to the Jews so they could crucify him.”³

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² John Dominic Crossan, a professor of Religious Studies at DePaul University, suggests two opposing readings of the historicity of Judas Iscariot. Some argue that Judas is a historical figure because he appears in each of the canonical gospels and the Book of Acts. It is suggested that he is too horrible a character to be a fictional man; the Christians would not make up such a disturbing act and would not especially place this figure among the exclusive circle of the twelve apostles, Jesus’ closest followers and friends. Others argue that Judas may be a fictional character created by the earliest Christians as a representation of the Jews, who are held responsible for the death of Jesus. The second group notes that in Hebrew, the name Judas comes from the word Jew. In comparing his name to the term “Judaism,” one will see that “Judas is Juda[j][s][m].”²
³ Judas Iscariot is commonly known as the man who betrayed Jesus; the catalyst for the occurrence of the crucifixion. Some say that Judas Iscariot is “the most hated man in history” (Greenburg, 24). Over time, Judas began to take the role as a representation of all Jews, past and present. As early as the first century, Ignatius refers to Jews as Christ-killers, and denotatively society associated the people of Jewish faith with Judas.
In a wider use, the name is equated with the role Judas plays in this story. Typed into the online Thesaurus, the term "Judas" calls up such synonyms as double-crosser, traitor, Benedict Arnold, betrayer, and backstabber. In the dictionary, the term is defined as: the disciple who betrayed Jesus; a person treacherous enough to betray a friend, a traitor; one who betrays another under the guise of friendship. National Geographic author Andrew Coleburn notes that in Germany the name of Judas cannot be given to any child.

We find that depictions of Judas are equally uniform. Used as an adjective the name Judas serves to create new words and word phrases based on betrayal. For instance, a goat that herds sheep into the slaughterhouse is known as a "Judas" goat.

For some, the name of Judas has "become synonymous with 'Jew' and the Judas tradition that emerges from the gospel texts has been used to justify anti-Semitism for centuries" (Saari, 140). For example, in the fourth century, Augustine argues that Judas represents the whole Jewish nation. Because Satan entered Judas in the Bible, he has entered all Jews who reject Jesus over time.

Others link Judas to antecedents found in Hebrew Scripture. In Hebrew, Judas is pronounced "Judah." Judah was the fourth son of Jacob, who sold his rival brother Joseph into slavery to gain the title of leader of the twelve tribes. Because of this, the name Judas and Judah have a negative connotation that is two-fold—Judas' betrayal was first committed by his predecessor Judah. Further, the term Jew comes from one being a citizen of Judah, and this was the political entity which rejected Jesus and turned him over to the Romans during the crucifixion. Philosopher AMH Saari notes there are those who believe the surname Iscariot comes from "The Hebrew term shachar, meaning 'false one' [which] is at the root of 'Iscariot.'" However, Saari is quick to point out that one must be wary of using this theory because "it is directly dependent on viewing Judas as a treacherous person." In reality, "the Hebrew root sakar [means] 'deliverer'. So his Hebrew name is a literal translation of... 'the one handing over.'" (Saari, 5-15).

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Stories in Conversation

There are few people who would defend his name or character. While all the characters in the Jesus story receive multiple portrayals across the four canonical gospels, there is little debate about the figure of Judas. The story of Judas Iscariot is commonly portrayed as black and white. Similarly, while everyone appears to know the story of Judas, few have taken the time to closely examine the texts that recount this narrative.

Christian Scripture\(^8\)

Scholars agree that each of the four canonical gospels included in Christian Scripture is written by a different author and is addressed to a distinct community. Each gospel shapes its characters accordingly. This diversity of accounts is most widely noted in the character of Jesus, but it is also true of the depictions of less central characters like Judas. New Testament scholar Craig A. Evans suggests that the diversity of accounts is based on the message that each author is attempting to reveal. In the Gospel According to Mark, “Jesus, as the true son of God, is set in contrast to Rome’s faith placed in the emperor as the son of God.” Matthew’s gospel depicts Jesus as “fulfill[ing] the Jewish Law and [prophecy] and teach[ing] his disciples the way of righteousness.” In the Gospel According to Luke, “Jesus is Savior and Benefactor of the whole human race.”\(^9\) John’s gospel suggests that “Jesus is the incarnation of God’s divine Logos.”\(^10\) As

\(^8\) The New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version translations were consulted.

demonstrated, a very different perspective is found in each. We must keep this difference in mind as we look into the story of Judas Iscariot that each gospel gives.

The first of the written gospels is thought to be the Gospel According to Mark. Mark's gospel in turn supplies the story line that two of the three remaining gospels follow. Matthew and Luke use the main story of Mark but expand upon it. Mark itself is very skeletal, focusing only on the miracles and parables of Jesus. Its language is simple and straightforward. The place where the gospel was written is unknown, but most scholars agree that it was written between 65 CE and 70 CE. The author shows intimate familiarity with the Jewish war with Rome, that began in 66 CE and reached its climax in the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Scholars note that the date assigned to Mark explains much of its content. One emphasis of the gospel is the "reinterpretation of the messiahship." Here authority is no longer attached to the position of a king or military leader, the messiah is someone who is a prophet and a teacher as well as one who performs miracles.

Many scholars believe that Matthew and Luke both independently used the Gospel of Mark and a book containing a selection of Jesus' sayings to compose their work. This sayings

10 The Greek term "Logos" means word. Thus John names Jesus "the Word of God." John 1:1-5 states "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." Most typically, all occurrences of the English "word" in the New Testament were translated from the Greek "logos." ("Logos." Harper Collins Bible Dictionary. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996.)

11 Many scholars believe that the Gospels were written in the order of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. This is highly disputed among scholars. Some believe that John was written before Luke. I have included it as Luke before John, because Luke has many of the same elements as Mark and Matthew, suggesting that the author had knowledge of these two writings, but no knowledge of John.

Gospel is commonly called Q, from the German word “Quelle” meaning “source.” The Gospels According to Matthew and Luke seem to take much of the genealogy and traditions from Mark and the teachings and words of Jesus from the source Q.

Building on Mark, the Gospel According to Matthew emphasizes Hebrew scripture and prophecy. Much of the Gospel of Matthew is made up of teachings given through parables. Most often, Matthew has much of the same information as Mark, but expands on the straightforward details. These expansions highlight the Jewish aspects of the Jesus character. This is done through techniques such as “poetic parallelism; scribal argument; and emphasis on law, religious practice, and piety; communal discipline; prayer; scriptural quotation and fulfillment.” In Matthew’s account Jesus acts as an interpreter of Moses. As the Messiah he fulfills the prophecy outlined in Hebrew Scripture.

Most scholars think that the Gospel According to Matthew was written between 80 and 90 CE. While the author appears to be aware of the destruction of the temple, he mainly refers to the authority of the Pharisees, a group whose importance was increased in the late 1st century. Matthew’s account is characterized “subtle anti-Romanism, opposition to religious authority, anti-Pharisaism, moral stringency, and apocalyptic severity.” Most scholars believe that Matthew was written for a Jewish audience in the later years of the first century, long after the death of Jesus.

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The Gospel According to Luke also builds on Mark, "addressing social and theological issues of crucial importance to the [emergent] church." This book was written sometime in the late first century or early second century. While the author is clearly aware of the second destruction of the Jewish temple this even is not emphasized. Probably one of the latest texts in the Christian Canon, its author makes no claim to having witnessed the events he is describing. In introducing his gospel, Luke states:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."^{17}

While Luke draws upon the Gospel of Mark and perhaps Matthew, this gospel is intended for a different audience and a different time. Most scholars believe that Luke is addressed to a non-Jewish audience, as there are few explicit references to the Hebrew Scripture or teachings. The author of Luke focuses mainly on the future. He spotlights Jesus' foresight rather than past prophecy that has been fulfilled. The Gospel of Luke also presents Christians living closer in harmony with their Greco-Roman neighbors. The author works to explain that Christianity is not a threat to the Roman political order as they are the "common people of God."^{18}

The most unique of the four gospels is the Gospel According to John. Many scholars argue that this gospel records the early stages of separation of the Christian community from its Jewish counterpart. It portrays the most hostile relationship between Jesus and "the Jews" suggesting that the author and audience of the Gospel of John were going through "a painful

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^{18} Matthews, Introduction to Luke (HCSB), 1759.
separation from the Jewish society to which its members had belonged." The Jews that John speaks of are perhaps only a select group, maybe even just the Jewish authorities. However, the author of John adds many stories and details that are not found in Mark, Matthew and Luke. In John, Jesus gives many long speeches with little background information. Scholars suggest that many of the followers of John already had a basic knowledge of the Christian faith. For this reason, the main point of this gospel is to encourage their faith and commitment through a time of hardship.

Judas Iscariot in the Canon

Despite the variety that characterizes these author’s accounts, the story of Judas is a common element across the four gospels. In each, the story of Judas Iscariot is told in three stages. Judas first goes to the high priests. Here, Judas and the priests plot how and when he will hand Jesus over to the authorities. A second act depicts the Passover dinner that Jesus shares with his disciples. During the meal Jesus tells the disciples that he will be betrayed by one of them. The third event is the arrest of Jesus. Euphemistically described as the “kiss of betrayal,” Judas leads the authorities to Jesus and they arrest him.

The accounts recorded in Matthew and Luke-Acts add a fourth element to the story. In these, the audience is also told about the death of Judas. This additional act gives closure to the Judas story and takes place after the previous three events.

20 Attridge, Introduction to the Gospel According to John (HCSB).
"The Plot"

The first event in the story of Judas is his interaction with the high priests. Mark introduces this story with a scene between Judas and the chief priests. Judas promises the priests that he will bring Jesus to them and the priests promise to pay him money in return.

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, went to the leading priests to arrange to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted when they heard why he had come, and they promised to give him money. So he began looking for an opportunity to betray Jesus.²¹

It does not mention anywhere in this account how much money Judas would be paid. Neither does it mention that Judas himself asked for the money. In this account, the reason that Judas chooses to betray Jesus remains a mystery – Judas initiates contact with the priests but his motivation remains a question.

The author of Matthew addresses the unstated question of motivation by asserting that Judas is motivated by greed. Matthew reports:

Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over."²²

In Matthew’s account, Judas asks how much money he will be given when he offers to give the priests information. As Matthew tells the story, 30 silver coins are given to Judas before he hands Jesus to the authorities. In this account, going to the chief priests seems to be solely Judas’ decision.

²¹ Mark 14:10-11
²² Matthew 26:14-16
The gospel of Luke answers the question of motivation differently. Luke incorporates an external factor in the decision that Judas makes. It is suggested that "Satan entered into Judas Iscariot" and motivated the plot with the priests to arrest Jesus.

The leading priests and teachers of religious law were plotting how to kill Jesus, but they were afraid of the people’s reaction. Then Satan entered into Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve disciples, and he went to the leading priests and captains of the Temple guard to discuss the best way to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted, and they promised to give him money. So he agreed and began looking for an opportunity to betray Jesus so they could arrest him when the crowds weren’t around.

Like Mark, this account does not mention the amount of money exchanged. As such, Judas does not appear to be motivated by greed. In framing Judas as possessed by the devil, going to the chief priests is no longer in his control.

The gospel of John appears to combine these motivations, suggesting that Judas is motivated by both greed and evil. John’s is the first account in which Judas appears with Jesus before going to the chief priests to plot the arrest. John also underscores Judas’ greed with a “back story” that adds greater depth to his actions.

Six days before the Passover celebration began, Jesus arrived in Bethany, the home of Lazarus—the man he had raised from the dead. A dinner was prepared in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, and Lazarus was among those who ate with him. Then Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus’ feet with it, wiping his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance. But Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would soon betray him, said, “That perfume was worth a year’s wages it should have been sold and the money given to the poor.” Not that he cared for the poor—he was a thief, and since he was in charge of the disciples’ money, he often stole some for himself. Jesus replied, “Leave her alone.

23 Luke 22:3
24 Luke 22:2-6
She did this in preparation for my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."  

It was time for supper, and the devil had already prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God.  

The meeting between Judas and the chief priests is absent in this account. Here, the emphasis is put on a larger pattern. Judas’ greed has a history that is known prior to his betrayal of Jesus.  

As John tells the story, the devil makes contact with Judas just before the time of the Passover dinner. Satan also plays a larger role in the Last Supper portion of John’s account.  

"The Last Supper"  

The second stage of the story of Judas is set within the context of Jesus’ last supper with the disciples. It is here that Jesus reveals the prophecy of his death. It is interesting that in Mark, Jesus does not ever point out that it is Judas that will betray him. Jesus says that he knows one of his disciples will hand him over, but he does not identify which one it will be.  

In the evening Jesus arrived with the twelve disciples. As they were at the table eating, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, one of you eating with me here will betray me.” Greatly distressed, each one asked in turn, “Am I the one?” He replied, “It is one of you twelve who is eating from this bowl with me. For the Son of Man must die, as the Scriptures declared long ago. But how terrible  

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25 John 12: 1-8  
26 John 13:2-3  
27 Here, the character of Judas is shown as a character foil of Mary (possibly Mary Magdalene). In John’s account, Mary understands that Jesus will soon die and prepares him for his burial. Judas, however, focuses on the money wasted on this act of anointment. Judas’ greed prompts Jesus to suggest that he does not understand the importance of Jesus’ death.
it will be for the one who betrays him. It would be far better for that man if he had never been born!"  

In Mark, Jesus claims the authority of Hebrew scripture in predicting his own death. This account suggests that the death of Jesus is necessary. At the same time, Jesus expresses some hostility toward the character that will betray him stating "it would be far better for that man if he had never been born." In one sense these two statements are contradictory. The first claims that Jesus must die to fulfill the prophecy; the second that the one who betrays Jesus is not worthy of life. In Mark, the disciples also ask who will betray Jesus. Jesus simply replies that it is one eating from the bowl with him. As Mark describes the scene, this could feasibly have been any one of the disciples.

The account given in the Gospel of Matthew follows the story found in Mark, with some additions.

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me." They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?" Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."  

In this account, Jesus repeats the prophecy from Hebrew Scripture. He also reiterates that the betrayer should not have been born. However, in Matthew, it is not specified that the prophecy reads that Jesus will die. Rather, it says that it is written "the son of man will go," not specifying to where he will go. Adding to the Markan account, Judas asks Jesus if he is the one

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28 Mark 14:17-21  
29 Mark 14:21  
30 Matthew 26:20-25
that will betray him. Jesus replies that he will be the one. Matthew is clear in stating that Jesus knows Judas will be the one to bring the authorities to arrest him.

Luke is similar to Mark and Matthew in content, but includes a parable within its sequence. This is consistent with the broader tenor of Luke. Throughout Luke, Jesus often teaches in the form of short stories.

"But here at this table, sitting among us as a friend, is the man who will betray me. For it has been determined that the Son of Man must die. But what sorrow awaits the one who betrays him." The disciples began to ask each other which of them would ever do such a thing. Then they began to argue among themselves about who would be the greatest among them. Jesus told them, "In this world the kings and great men lord it over their people, yet they are called 'friends of the people.' But among you it will be different. Those who are the greatest among you should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant. Who is more important, the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? The one who sits at the table, of course. But not here! For I am among you as one who serves. "You have stayed with me in my time of trial. And just as my Father has granted me a Kingdom, I now grant you the right to eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom. And you will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

The author of Luke also adds an argument between the disciples showing that they were in competition to determine "who was the greatest" or the most worthy. Jesus uses this opportunity to teach his followers, telling them that the best leaders are servants. Nonetheless, underscoring the future stature of the disciples, he claims that they will one day be the judges of the "twelve tribes." As in Mark, Jesus does not reveal that the betrayal will be the work of Judas. In contrast to Mark and Matthew, Jesus notes that his betrayer will face much suffering, but does not claim that this individual should not have been born.

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32 The twelve tribes of Israel
Of the four accounts, the Gospel of John is again the most unique. While John incorporates the same idea of the synoptic gospels, John expands the story considerably.

"I am not saying these things to all of you; I know the ones I have chosen. But this fulfills the Scripture that says, 'The one who eats my food has turned against me.' I tell you this beforehand, so that when it happens you will believe that I AM the Messiah. I tell you the truth, anyone who welcomes my messenger is welcoming me, and anyone who welcomes me is welcoming the Father who sent me." Now Jesus was deeply troubled, and he exclaimed, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me!" The disciples looked at each other, wondering whom he could mean. The disciple Jesus loved was sitting next to Jesus at the table. Simon Peter motioned to him to ask, "Who's he talking about?" So that disciple leaned over to Jesus and asked, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus responded, "It is the one to whom I give the bread I dip in the bowl." And when he had dipped it, he gave it to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot. When Judas had eaten the bread, Satan entered into him. Then Jesus told him, "Hurry and do what you're going to do." None of the others at the table knew what Jesus meant. Since Judas was their treasurer, some thought Jesus was telling him to go and pay for the food or to give some money to the poor. So Judas left at once, going out into the night.

Throughout John, Jesus reiterates that his death is meant to convince the world that he is the Messiah. The explicit goal of the Gospel of John is to "encourage its readers to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the son of God." Like Luke, this gospel accredits the betrayal to the devil. However, here the devil literally enters Judas when he eats the bread that Jesus gave him. In this account, Judas is also given direct permission from Jesus to complete the task. Jesus urges Judas, "hurry and do what you are going to do."

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33 The synoptic gospels are recognized as the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke
34 John 12: 4-8, 13:25-30
35 Attridge, Introduction to the Gospel According to John (HCSB), 1815.
“The Kiss of Betrayal”

A third stage in the story is marked by what has become known as the kiss of betrayal. Here the author of Mark uses a form of the Greek term παραδίδωμι, “to hand over,” to describe the act of Judas Iscariot.36

When he returned to them the third time, he said, “Go ahead and sleep. Have your rest. But no—the time has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Up, let’s be going. Look, my betrayer is here!” And immediately, even as Jesus said this, Judas, one of the twelve disciples, arrived with a crowd of men armed with swords and clubs. They had been sent by the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the elders. The traitor, Judas, had given them a prearranged signal: “You will know which one to arrest when I greet him with a kiss. Then you can take him away under guard.” As soon as they arrived, Judas walked up to Jesus. “Rabbi!” he exclaimed, and gave him the kiss. Then the others grabbed Jesus and arrested him. But one of the men with Jesus pulled out his sword and struck the high priest’s slave, slashing off his ear. Jesus asked them, “Am I some dangerous revolutionary, that you come with swords and clubs to arrest me? Why didn’t you arrest me in the Temple? I was there among you teaching every day. But these things are happening to fulfill what the Scriptures say about me.”37

In this account, Judas gives the angry crowds a sign to arrest Jesus: he kisses Jesus on the cheek and Jesus “Rabbi,” the word for teacher. Although a kiss to a teacher is a sign of respect, here Judas uses the respectful gesture as a ploy to have Jesus arrested by the authorities. As the exchange closes, Jesus again refers to the prophecy of his death.

Matthew’s recounting is almost identical to the one in Mark. However, Matthew’s includes the additional detail that Jesus is on the Mount of Olives. Matthew borrows from Mark in Jesus’ description of Judas to the other eleven disciples.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him

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36 The translation of the English Harper Collins Bible reads “betrayer.” The original Greek word is παραδίδωμι. When looked up in the Greek dictionary, the meaning was “to hand over.”

37 Mark 14:41-49
was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for." Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus’ companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" At that time Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.38

Judas again greets Jesus by saying, "Greetings, Rabbi" and gives the sign of the kiss to the authorities. However, in Matthew’s account, Jesus responds with kinder words: "Friend, do what you are here to do."

In Luke’s telling of the story, Jesus demonstrates that he is the Messiah by foretelling actions and performing miracles throughout the narrative.

But even as Jesus said this, a crowd approached, led by Judas, one of the twelve disciples. Judas walked over to Jesus to greet him with a kiss. But Jesus said, "Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" When the other disciples saw what was about to happen, they exclaimed, "Lord, should we fight? We brought the swords!" And one of them struck at the high priest’s slave, slashing off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this." And he touched the man’s ear and healed him. Then Jesus spoke to the leading priests, the captains of the Temple guard, and the elders who had come for him. "Am I some dangerous revolutionary," he asked, "that you come with swords and clubs to arrest me? Why didn’t you arrest me in the Temple? I was there every day. But this is your moment, the time when the power of darkness reigns." So they arrested him and led him to the high priest’s home.39

In Luke’s account, Jesus foresees Judas’ kiss and asks, "are you going to betray me with a kiss?"

Further in this account Judas never actually physically kisses Jesus; the thought is there, but the action is not specified. A crowd of people arrive while Jesus is speaking to his disciples, emphasizing that the arrest of Jesus is a community effort rather than an encounter between

38 Matthew 26: 45-52.
Jesus, Judas, and the temple guards. Also in this account, a mystical layer is introduced. Jesus states that the "time when the power of darkness reigns" is upon them, as the guards arrest him.

The Gospel of John, like Luke, works to depict Jesus as all-knowing. This author focuses less on the actions of Jesus and more on the words he exchanges with the crowd who came to arrest him.

After saying these things, Jesus crossed the Kidron Valley with his disciples and entered a grove of olive trees. Judas, the betrayer, knew this place, because Jesus had often gone there with his disciples. The leading priests and Pharisees had given Judas a contingent of Roman soldiers and Temple guards to accompany him. Now with blazing torches, lanterns, and weapons, they arrived at the olive grove. Jesus fully realized all that was going to happen to him, so he stepped forward to meet them. "Who are you looking for?" he asked. "Jesus the Nazarene," they replied. "I AM he," Jesus said. (Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.) As Jesus said "I AM he," they all drew back and fell to the ground! Once more he asked, "Who are you looking for?" And again they replied, "Jesus the Nazarene." "I told you that I AM he," Jesus said. "And since I am the one you want, let these others go." He did this to fulfill his own statement: "I did not lose a single one of those you have given me."

Like Luke, in John’s story Judas brings a large crowd to arrest Jesus, ensuring that there are many witnesses to recount what happened on the mountain. The author emphasizes Jesus’ power when “[the soldiers] all drew back and fell to the ground” because Jesus spoke to them. The scene ends with Jesus telling the crowd that they are there for him, not the other men, so the disciples should be permitted to leave. Once again, Jesus’ actions are framed as fulfilling

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40 The hour and power of darkness is considered the hour of Satan’s reign. Some ministers preach that “the hour and the power of darkness were short, and such the triumphs of the wicked always will be.” According to the Christian tradition, when Jesus allowed himself to be arrested, was crucified, and was resurrected, he delivered the people from the power of darkness. The hour of the power of darkness is said to be a very short amount of time in relation to the timetable of the New Testament.

prophecy found in Hebrew Scripture. Each portion of the dialogue underscores Jesus’ powerful and prophetic nature.

“The Death of Judas”

As noted above, the only biblical accounts that tell the story of Judas after the arrest of Jesus are found in the Gospel According to Matthew and the Luke-Acts sequence. In the Gospel According to Matthew, Judas commits suicide when he finds that his actions cannot be undone.

Very early in the morning the leading priests and the elders met again to lay plans for putting Jesus to death. Then they bound him, led him away, and took him to Pilate, the Roman governor. When Judas, who had betrayed him, realized that Jesus had been condemned to die, he was filled with remorse. So he took the thirty pieces of silver back to the leading priests and the elders. “I have sinned,” he declared, “for I have betrayed an innocent man.” “What do we care?” they retorted. “That’s your problem.” Then Judas threw the silver coins down in the Temple and went out and hanged himself. The leading priests picked up the coins. “It wouldn’t be right to put this money in the Temple treasury,” they said, “since it was payment for murder.” After some discussion they finally decided to buy the potter’s field, and they made it into a cemetery for foreigners. That is why the field is still called the Field of Blood. This fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah that says, “They took the thirty pieces of silver—the price at which he was valued by the people of Israel, and purchased the potter’s field, as the LORD directed. 42

In Matthew’s account, Judas repents because “he was filled with remorse... [when he] realized that Jesus had been condemned to die.” 43 He attempts to return the money—again identified as thirty silver coins—to the chief priests. Judas’s decision to hang himself is unique to this account. 44 However as the story is told, the money “was payment for murder.... [and they]

42 Matthew 27:3-10.
43 Matthew 27:3.
44 Many tradition legends teach that Judas hanged himself from what is now called the Judas Tree, or the Redbud tree. After Judas hanged himself from the tree, the white flowers turned red with blood or shame.
could not put it in the Temple treasury.”  

The Chief Priests do not want to accept it when Judas insists on returning the money. A Field of Blood is purchased and becomes the burial ground for foreigners. Matthew uses this exchange to claim fulfillment of another prophecy found in Hebrew Scripture. His emphasis on the fulfillment of prophecy brings the biblical writings full circle, developing connections between the actions of the current time and the writings of the past.


In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry.” (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

As recounted in Acts, the story of the death of Judas is offered as an aside to a speech Peter delivers to the disciples. Its placement suggests that the story of Judas’s death is secondary to a more important issue. His position as one of the twelve must be filled. Here it is reported that Judas reached the gruesome and unappealing ending of “[falling] headlong, his body burst[ing] open and all his intestines spill[ing] out.” As in Matthew, however, his demise fulfills prophecy: “the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the

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45 It seems ironic that the Priests do not want to put the money back in the treasury since it was money used for murder, but they took the money out of the Temple treasury to allow for said murder.
46 Acts of the Apostles 1:15-19
47 Acts of the Apostles 1:18
mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus.” In this Hebrew Scripture, Judas is not portrayed as a betrayer but as a guide.

In Luke’s account it is not the priests but Judas who purchases the field with “the reward he got for his wickedness.” As a punishment, he perishes on the very land he bought with “blood money.” The field is once again deemed as the Field of Blood, which is today a historical location. In contrast to Matthew, Luke’s account shows Judas feeling no remorse for his actions. He uses the money that he was given to further his own property.

The Gospel of Judas

While these are the most familiar accounts of the life of Jesus and his followers, new books are surfacing that represent the lesser known characters of the New Testament. We have listened so long to the stories contained in these gospels that we have begun to think of them as true. But what if, there was a different side of this story?

A recent discovery suggests that maybe there is. The Gospel of Judas makes an alternate story heard, giving the disciple Judas a voice in his own story. Framed as a secret account of Jesus, the Gospel of Judas begins prior to Judas meeting with the chief priests. It answers the question that all the other stories leave out: what happened before Judas decided to hand over Jesus?

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48 In this account, however, Peter is the authority figure reciting the prophecies.
49 through the Acts of the Apostles
The Gospel of Judas was discovered in Egypt in the 1970s and has been studied by scholars since this time. Believed to come from the second century, the Gospel of Judas is on some occasions credited for presenting Judas Iscariot not only as Jesus’ betrayer but as his enlightened, favored disciple. While the Gospel is thought to have been written in Greek it was later translated in Coptic, a form of Egyptian writing that uses Greek letters.

The story told in this gospel is both similar to and different from the gospels within the canon. The author of the Gospel of Judas introduces the text with the promise that it is a “secret account.”

“The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover.”

A key element in this is Judas’ favored status. Jesus reveals these ‘secrets’ to Judas, not any of the other disciples encountered as central characters in the canonical stories.

By telling the reader that these teachings were delivered over the course of “a week” and “three days before Passover,” the audience is given a timeline that places this story within the familiar canonical narrative. This timing works in conjunction with the period leading up to the betrayal of Jesus. As such, the text “fills in” what happened during the period Jesus is preparing his disciples for his death.

50 Found in the middle of Egypt by peasants, the Gospel of Judas had an exciting travel life. It was moved to a humid safety deposit box in New York where it began its disintegration. In 2001, it was frozen and finally recovered by philologist Rodolphe Kasser, who began its restoration process, with the help of National Geographic scholars. After 5 years, the book was released to the public by National Geographic and scholars began discussing its credibility and place in the world of religion.

51 Claremont New Testament professor and scholar Marvin Meyer suggests that this account is different because “the point... is that Jesus is a savior not because of a sacrificial death that he experiences but rather because of the wisdom and knowledge that he reveals.” (Kasser, et al, 15).

The next section of the Gospel of Judas rehearses “the earthly ministry of Jesus.” It references the “miracles and great wonders” that Jesus performed when he “appeared on earth.”

When Jesus appeared on earth, he performed miracles and great wonders for the salvation of humanity. And since some [walked] in the way of righteousness while others walked in their transgressions, the twelve disciples were called. He began to speak with them about the mysteries beyond the world and what would take place at the end. Often he did not appear to his disciples as himself, but he was found among them (as a child). The teachings underscore the role that Jesus would like the disciples to play in saving humanity. Because “some walked in the way of righteousness while others walked in their transgressions,” Jesus called the disciples to “speak with them about mysteries beyond the world and what would take place at the end.” Jesus wants to give knowledge to his disciples so that they may encourage others.

In the Gospel of Judas, Jesus is often very sarcastic and at times pessimistic. There are multiple instances when he laughs at the disciples for their practice of faith. Jesus attempts to teach the disciples that the creation story they have been taught for so long is not what they should be learning. Further, he informs them that the God they have been worshipping is not the true God. Some of the ways that Jesus chooses to bring this idea forward seem condescending and cynical, but his message is clear: the teachings of the canon are not the complete story. Jesus suggests that these books must not be trusted to stand on their own.

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53 Kasser et al., 29.
54 The excerpt “as a child” has been taken out in the newest translation of the text. It can be assumed that Christ appeared as a child to have the air of innocence and purity. The Christ figure is seen to be as the epitome of purity, but as an innocent child the purity is intensified.
55 Kasser et al., 30.
The disciples must look more deeply into other sources to completely understand our place in the world.

One day he was with his disciples in Judea, and he found them gathered together and seated in pious observance. When he [approached] his disciples, gathered together and seated and offering a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread, [he] laughed. The disciples said to [him], "Master, why are you laughing at [our] prayer of thanksgiving? We have done what is right." He answered and said to them, "I am not laughing at you. <You> are not doing this because of your own will but because it is through this that your god [will be] praised." They said, "Master, you are [...] the son of our god." Jesus said to them, "How do you know me? Truly [I] say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me."

Through this section, Jesus continually uses the language of "your God." This suggests that this god is someone different than Jesus' God, who is implied to be the "real" God. Jesus criticizes his disciples saying that they are performing these actions "not because of [their] own will but because it is through [these actions] that [their] god will be praised." He intimates that the god of the earthly beings is a needy, materialistic god.

At the end of the section, Jesus says to his disciples, "Truly [I] say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me." The introduction of this statement, "truly I say to you,"\textsuperscript{56} carries the language that the gospels in the canon consistently use. This statement introduces the authority of Jesus. However, the message of this specific statement is contradictory to any that is given within Christian Scripture. Throughout the canon we come to learn that Jesus works to encourage his disciples to know him and to know God, "the father." However, in the Gospel of Judas, Jesus tells the same disciples that none of them will know him. As the gospel progresses, the idea of the worldly generations not knowing Jesus or the true God becomes a recurring theme.

\textsuperscript{56} Sometimes also said as "Truly I say to you" or "This I say to you" or even "Amen, I say to you."
When his disciples heard this, they started getting angry and infuriated and began blaspheming against him in their hearts. When Jesus observed their lack of understanding, he said to them, “Why has this agitation led you to anger? Your god who is within you and [...] have provoked you to anger [within] your souls. [Let] any one of you who is [strong enough] among human beings bring out the perfect human and stand before my face.”

Jesus indicates that the anger rising within the hearts of the disciples is from their god who is within them. He says that the spirit of the person is mixed with the angry spirit of their god, which results in their blasphemy. Jesus tells the disciples that they should allow the inner spiritual person of their being to come to the surface and be expressed.

As the story progresses, Judas is distinguished from the rest of the disciples. He is singled out as the one disciple who was “able to stand before [Jesus].” Similar to the Gospel of John where all of the men fall back when Jesus speaks to them, Judas is able to remain on his feet. Nonetheless, because Judas is not fully enlightened he cannot look Jesus in the eye.

They all said, “We have the strength.” But their spirits did not dare to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot. He was able to stand before him, but he could not look him in the eyes, and he turned his face away. Judas [said] to him, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you.”

Judas is also said to have the knowledge of who Jesus is and a deeper knowledge of a generation that was never mentioned in the New Testament Gospels, “the immortal realm of Barbelo.” Further, Judas seems to realize, unlike the other disciples, that he “is not worthy” of knowing or addressing the God that Jesus speaks of.

The knowledge that Judas holds allows him to be physically separated from the rest of the disciples. Jesus calls him forth and shares further knowledge with him.
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. [36] For someone else will replace you, in order that the twelve [disciples] may again come to completion with their god.”

Here this Gospel's account connects directly to the New Testament gospels. The grieving Judas collaborates with the account relayed in Matthew, where Judas suffers for the decision he made to hand over Jesus. The replacement of Judas also attaches to the Acts of the Apostles where Judas is replaced by Matthias.57 When Jesus tells Judas he will be replaced, he states that it is “in order that the twelve [disciples] may again come to completion with their god.” This statement implies that the Judas' replacement is necessary for earthly means, but that Judas should not worry about such things.

Though Judas is portrayed as the enlightened disciple, he still does not receive all of the answers that he wants. When Judas asks Jesus identify the time he will be enlightened, Jesus simply disappears, thus avoiding the question.

Judas said to him, “When will you tell me these things, and [when] will the great day of light dawn for the generation?” But when he said this, Jesus left him. The next morning, after this happened, Jesus [appeared] to his disciples again. They said to him “Master, where did you go and what did you do when you left us?” Jesus said to them, “I went to another great and holy generation.” 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? [37] Truly [I] say to you, no one born [of] this aeon will see that [generation], and no host of angels of the stars will rule over that generation, and no person of mortal birth can associate with it, because that generation does not come from […] which has become […]. The generation of people among [you] is from the generation of humanity […] power, which […] the] other powers […] by [which] you rule.” When [his] disciples heard this, they each were troubled in spirit. They could not say a word. Another day Jesus came up to [them]. They said to [him], “Master, we have seen you in a [vision], for we have had great [dreams …] night […].” [He said], “Why have [you … when] <you> have gone into hiding?” [38]

57 Matthias is chosen to replace Judas Iscariot as the 12th disciple in Acts of the Apostles 1:26
This portion of the gospel has many words that were unable to be translated so much of the content is missing. Nonetheless, when Jesus re-appears to his disciples the next day, he seems to suggest there is no Heaven or afterlife in a greater place than earth to look forward to. Challenging a fundamental explanation for Jesus’ crucifixion, namely dying to take away the sins of the people and unlock the gates of Heaven, he contradicts a main theme of the tradition. This is “that the primary element in the mission of the earthly Jesus was to suffer and die.”

The next part of the text attaches to the canonical story of Jesus cleansing the Jewish temples. In the conventional story Jesus tells those buying and selling in the temple that his house “shall be called a house of prayer; but [they were] making it a house of robbers.”

They [said, “We have seen] a great [house with a large] altar [in it, and] twelve men—they are the priests, we would say—and a name; and a crowd of people is waiting at that altar, [until] the priests […] and receive] the offerings. [But] we kept waiting.” [Jesus said], “What are [the priests] like?” They [said, “Some …] two weeks; [some] sacrifice their own children, others their wives, in praise [and] humility with each other; some sleep with men; some are involved in [slaughter]; some commit a multitude of sins and deeds of lawlessness. And the men who stand [before] the altar invoke your [name]; [39] and in all the deeds of their deficiency, the sacrifices are brought to completion […].” After they said this, they were quiet, for they were troubled.

In the Gospel of Judas, the disciples recount their own vision that they had of the Jewish temple. The priests that they encounter in the temple take part in corrupt actions. However, they themselves are implicated. These twelve men that they see in the vision appear to represent the twelve disciples leading the people after the death of Jesus.

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58 According to the translation by Marvin Meyer, “the generation of people among [you] is from the generation of humanity” means that “people who are part of this world below live in mortality and cannot attain that great [strong and holy] generation.” (Kasser et al., 34.)


60 Matthew 21: 12-13
Jesus then explains the vision of the temple to his disciples. Prefacing his teaching with the phrase “Truly I say to you” a common refrain in canonical texts, he asks the disciples

“Why are you troubled? Truly I say to you, all the priests who stand before that altar invoke my name. Again I say to you, my name has been written on this [...] of the generations of the stars through the human generations. [And they] have planted trees without fruit, in my name, in a shameful manner.”

Jesus tells his disciples that the priests are spreading the word “in a shameful manner” for they “have planted trees without fruit.” As a result, they are creating followers who lack understanding.

As the story continues, the disciples are told that the priests in the vision represent each of them. 61

Jesus said to them, “Those you have seen receiving the offerings at the altar—that is who you are. That is the god you serve, and you are those twelve men you have seen. The cattle you have seen brought for sacrifice are the many people you lead astray before that altar. [...] will stand and make use of my name in this way, and generations of the pious will remain loyal to him. After him another man will stand there from [the fornicators], and another [will] stand there from the slayers of children, and another from those who sleep with men, and those who abstain, and the rest of the people of pollution and lawlessness and error, and those who say, ‘We are like angels’; they are the stars that bring everything to its conclusion. For to the human generations it has been said, ‘Look, God has received your sacrifice from the hands of a priest’—that is, a minister of error. But it is the Lord, the Lord of the universe, who commands, ‘On the last day they will be put to shame.” Jesus said [to them], “Stop sacrificing [...] which you have [...] over the altar, since they are over your stars and your angels and have already come to their conclusion there. So let them be [ensnared] before you, and let them go [—about 15 lines missing—] generations [...]. A baker cannot feed all creation under [heaven].

61 Scholars such as Professor of New Testament at UNC Chapel Hill, Bart D. Ehrman, believe that this portrays that the “leaders of the emerging orthodox church are immoral in their own lives and are endangering the lives of the children of God by emphasizing sacrificial themes and leading people into spiritual death” (Kasser, 36). King states that Jesus accuses the priests of leading people astray through their God who falsely uses the name of Jesus to give himself credibility (Pagels, 138). Karen King and Elaine Pagels state that the sacrificial journey to death is the introduction of martyrdom (Kasser et al., 36).
The animals that had been taken into the church and slaughtered for sacrifice were a representation of the people who were “victims of the improper religious observance in the church.” The gospel intimates that because Jesus and Judas are part of an elite group with knowledge, they are not represented by the people in the vision. At the end of this passage, Jesus states that the priests who caused such havoc will be “put to shame... on the last day.”

Here the gospel references an astrological emphasis common to Gnostic strains of Christianity. Within this system, the creator made one star for every person, and each person returns to his or her star at the end of their time on earth.

And [...] to them [...] and [...] to us and [...]. Jesus said to them, “Stop struggling with me. Each of you has his own star, and every[body—about 17 lines missing—] in [...] who has come [...] for the tree [...] of this aeon [...] for a time [...] but he has come to water God’s paradise, and the [generation] that will last, because [he] will not defile the [walk of life of] that generation, but [...] for all eternity.” Judas said to [him, “Rabb], what kind of fruit does this generation produce?” Jesus said, “The souls of every human generation will die. When these people, however, have completed the time of the kingdom and the spirit leaves them, their bodies will die but their souls will be alive, and they will be taken up.” Judas said, “And what will the rest of the human generations do?” Jesus said, “It is impossible [44] to sow seed on [rock] and harvest its fruit. [This] is also the way [...] the [defiled] generation [...] and corruptible Sophia [...] the hand that has created mortal people, so that their souls go up to the eternal realms above. [Truly] I say to you, [...] angel [...] power will be able to see that [...] these to whom [...] holy generations [...]” After Jesus said this, he departed.

When Judas asks about the fruitfulness of his generation, Jesus refers to one of his more well-known New Testament parables about sowing seeds. In Luke, Jesus tells the disciples and a crowd of people that one must be careful in sowing one’s seeds, because placement is

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62 Kasser et al., 36.
63 Kasser et al., 37.
64 Some scholars, such as Meyer, believe that he is referring to Plato’s idea that every person has a star. However, other scholars like New Testament scholar and Professor April Deconick disagree with this claim. She believes that the stars that Jesus speaks of represent the underworld, therefore encapsulating a negative representation of individuality.
everything. Here as in the canonical gospels, the disciples question Jesus for speaking to them in parables. In the canonical gospels, Jesus tells them it was to enlighten the disciples about the secrets and mysteries of God but that the people will look but never see and hear but never understand. In the Gospel of Judas, Jesus suggests the opposite – no one will see nor understand, whether they are a disciple or not, because they follow the word of the false God.

At this point, Judas commands the sole attention of Jesus to share a vision that he has. In response, Jesus again laughs at Judas and ridicules him for worrying.

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.” Judas said to him, “In the vision I saw myself as the twelve disciples were stoning me and persecuting me severely. And I also came to the place where [...] after you. I saw [a house ...], and my eyes could not [comprehend] its size. Great people were surrounding it, and that house had a roof of greenery, and in the middle of the house was [a crowd—two lines missing—], saying, ‘Master, take me in along with these people’.”

The vision that Judas has is much different from the one described by the rest of the disciples’ because it is explicitly about him. Judas’ vision is about the grief Jesus previously tells him he will experience. In the vision, he appears to be enlightened and the people present call him master.

Jesus works to explain this vision. First, Jesus tells Judas that his “star has led [him] astray.”

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65 For Jesus, the “seed is the word of God” and the people who fall on the rocks are “those who, when they hear the word receive it with joy. But these have no root. They believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away.” Luke 8:4-15. Similar in Matthew 13:1-23 and Mark 4:1-20.
66 Jesus was even appealing to his disciples and the author to their readers with the language of secrecy. They were entrusting the “secret mysteries of God” to the people who read the text.
[Jesus] answered and said, “Judas, your star has led you astray.” He continued, “No person of mortal birth is worthy to enter the house you have seen, for that place is reserved for the holy. Neither the sun nor the moon will rule there, nor the day, but the holy will abide there always, in the eternal realm with the holy angels. Look, I have explained to you the mysteries of the kingdom and I have taught you about the error of the stars; and [...] send it [...] on the twelve aeons.” Judas said, “Master, could it be that my seed is under the control of the rulers?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Come, that I [...] two lines missing —, but that you will grieve much when you see the kingdom and all its generation.” When he heard this, Judas said to him, “What good is it that I have received it? For you have set me apart for that generation.” Jesus answered and said, “You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations—and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation].”

Judas’s star has misled him or he has not followed his star the way that he should have, which is why he had the vision.67 Jesus explains that no mortal can see the house that Judas has seen. Nonetheless, as Judas is called the thirteenth spirit68 he is an outsider to the number of the earthly twelve disciples. However, Judas is not only separated from the twelve, he is placed above them.

Jesus also ridicules Judas for “trying so hard.” Jesus wonders why all of the disciples work so diligently to complete the work of their God, when diligence is not required for enlightenment. According to the theme of this text, the only thing required is knowledge.69 Although as Judas finds his way through the knowledge that Jesus has given him, he will be

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67 Ehrman reveals that in the Gnostic belief guiding angels are connected to the stars representing each person’s soul. What today we might call a “guiding light” was once referred to as a “guiding star.”

68 There is much debate over the translation of the word “spirit” in this context. It can be believed to be translated as daimon, or a spiritual being superior to mortals. Some scholars, such as Ehrman and Meyer believe it to mean the thirteenth “daimon,” which means a spiritual being who is superior to mere mortals. They believe that the term daimon means something very different than its homonym, demon. According to these scholars, a daimon is a positive, leading spirit; Judas is introduced as this ruling spirit of all the others in his generation. However other scholars, like DeConick, believe that Jesus means to call Judas a demon, or an evil spirit, here. She suggests that “daimon” represents “maleficent beings, evil spirits, fallen angels, and the demonic host.” (DeConick, 109). Judas, in her opinion, comes forth as an evil spirit to do the bidding of the demons of the thirteenth realm. The thirteenth realm is “the one of the demon Demuirge, Ialdabaoth, his assistant Archons, and his particular cosmic realm. This comes from the Sethian texts (from the Nag Hammadi collection) (DeConick, 110).

69 This follows the Gnostic belief that knowledge is the key to enlightenment.
cursed by other generations, one day Judas will reach the status of the holy generation and rule over the rest of the disciples.

At this point in the story, Jesus explicitly says that he will teach Judas the secrets that he promised in the beginning of the text.

Jesus said, "[Come], that I may teach you about [secrets] no person [has] ever seen. For there exists a great and boundless realm, whose extent no generation of angels has seen, [in which] there is [a] great invisible [Spirit], which no eye of an angel has ever seen, no thought of the heart has ever comprehended, and it was never called by any name. "And a luminous cloud appeared there. He said, 'Let an angel come into being as my attendant.' "A great angel, the enlightened divine Self-Generated, emerged from the cloud.

As he introduces a realm beyond the earthly world, Jesus describes this world as the one housing immortal beings. The angels themselves have not seen how far the realm expands.

Jesus separates his God from the creation story of the Jewish God. He recounts a Gnostic creation story that traces its lineage back to Seth. He includes a description of the creation of the twelve realms and the twelve leaders that rule over the realms.

Because of him, four other angels came into being from another cloud, and they became attendants for the angelic Self-Generated. The Self-Generated said, 'Let [...] come into being [...] ,' and it came into being [...] That is how he created the rest of the enlightened aeons. He made them reign over them, and he created for them myriads of angels without number, to assist them... Adams was in the first luminous cloud... He made the incorruptible [generation] of Seth appear... The twelve aeons of the twelve luminaries constitute their father, with six heavens for each aeon... They were given authority and a [great] host of angels [without number], for glory and adoration, [and after that also] virgin spirits, for glory and [adoration] of all the aeons and the heavens and their firmaments... The twelve rulers spoke with the twelve angels: 'Let each of you [...] and let them [...] generation [—one line lost—] angels': The first is [S]eth, who is called Christ... Then Saklas said to his angels, 'Let us create a human being after the likeness and after the image.' They fashioned Adam and his wife Eve, who is called, in the cloud, Zoe. For by this name all the generations seek the man, and each of them calls the woman by these names. Now, Sakla did not command [...] except [...] the generations [...] this [...]. And the [ruler] said to Adam, "You shall live long, with your children."

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70 Because this passage is of excessive length, I have shortened it to give the necessary information.
In the Gnostic account, a self-imposed God created many realms each with a leader. These leaders were given the authority and power to further create servants and beings for each of their realms. This account counters the more commonly known creation story\(^1\) in which God makes the world and all of its inhabitants in 7 days. Here, all creatures remain in the same realm during their life.\(^2\) In both accounts, however, a man named Adam and a woman named Eve were created to be the ancestors of all human beings.

After hearing about the holy realm, Judas becomes curious about the length of a human life.

Judas said to Jesus, "[What] is the long duration of time that the human being will live?" Jesus said, "Why are you wondering about this, that Adam, with his generation, has lived his span of life in the place where he has received his kingdom, with longevity with his ruler?" Judas said to Jesus, "Does the human spirit die?" Jesus said, "This is why God ordered Michael to give the spirits of people to them as a loan, so that they might offer service, but the Great One ordered Gabriel to grant spirits to the great generation with no ruler over it—that is, the spirit and the soul. Therefore, the [rest] of the souls [—one line missing—]. "[...] light [—nearly two lines missing—] around [...] let [...] spirit [that is] within you dwell in this [flesh] among the generations of angels. But God caused knowledge to be [given] to Adam and those with him, so that the kings of chaos and the underworld might not lord it over them." Judas said to Jesus, "So what will those generations do?" Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, for all of them the stars bring matters to completion. When Saklas completes the span of time assigned for him, their first star will appear with the generations, and they will finish what they said they would do. Then they will fornicate.

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\(^1\) Genesis 2: 4-25

\(^2\) The Bishop Irenaeus addresses the difference between the Gnostic creation story, and that of his own Christian tradition. According his text, *On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis*, "certain men, rejecting the truth, are introducing among us false stories and vain genealogies, which serve rather to controversies... than to God's work of building up in the faith. By their craftily constructed rhetoric they lead astray the minds of the inexperienced, and take them captive, corrupting the oracles of the Lord, and being evil expounders of what was well spoken. For they upset many, leading them away by the pretense of knowledge from Him who constituted and ordered the universe, as if they had something higher and greater to show them than the God who made the heaven and the earth and all that is in them. By skillful language they artfully attract the simple-minded into their kind of inquiry, and then crudely destroy them by working up their blasphemous and impious view about the Demiurge. Nor can their simple hearers distinguish the lie from the truth" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1, ANF.).
in my name and slay their children and they will [...] and [—about six and a half lines missing—] my name, and he will [...] your star over the [thirt]eenth aeon." After that Jesus [laughed]. [Judas said], "Master, [why are you laughing at us]?

Jesus reveals to Judas that the world is comprised of two different types of humans: those with a brief existence and those who were created to live on. The beings who will live for a brief time have only been created to serve their God. Made by their creator and loaned a spirit they give service while they are on earth. Once they have completed this service, their spirit is taken from them. The second category of beings was created to live. These beings still serve, but have knowledge that will take them to the next realm. These beings have been given a soul that will allow them to continue living. Put simply, those with a soul have the divine spark and the ability to have the secret knowledge of the greater generation.

It is in its last two sections that the of the Gospel of Judas most directly diverges from the canonical storyline that we have come to know. Here, Jesus tells Judas that he "will exceed all of them."74

Judas said to Jesus, "Look, what will those who have been baptized in your name do?" Jesus said, "Truly I say [to you], this baptism [56] [...] my name [—about nine lines missing—] to me. Truly [I] say to you, Judas, [those who] offer sacrifices to Saklas [...] God [—three lines missing—] everything that is evil. "But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me. Already your horn has been raised, your wrath has been kindled, your star has shone brightly,

73 Bart Ehrman suggests that all human beings are composed of three things. The actual body is the material aspect holding the being together. The spirit is what is given to the body to animate it and give it life. This is what enables the body to work and serve. Finally, the body and spirit are given a soul that lives on once the spirit has departed and the body has died.
74 Bart Ehrman and Marvin Meyer believe that Judas positively exceeds the other disciples. He helps set the character of Judas free and then transcends this world. April DeConick, however, believes that Judas exceeds the others in a negative way. She believes that the translation reads that Jesus tells Judas he "will do worse than all of them, for the man that clothes [Jesus], [Judas] will sacrifice him" (DeConick, 125). I side with Ehrman and Meyer in this interpretation of this text because their translation in this section has more strength in comparison with the rest of the text. DeConick's version, however, has more bearing when compared with the canonical stories.
and your heart has [...]. [57] “Truly [...] your last [...] become [...] about two and a half lines missing—], grieve [...] about two lines missing—] the ruler, since he will be destroyed. And then the image of the great generation of Adam will be exalted, for prior to heaven, earth, and the angels, that generation, which is from the eternal realms, exists. 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, saying, [58] [...] great generation [...] [... image [...] about five lines missing—].

In this account, Judas rises above those in his generation when he helps Jesus “sacrifice the man that clothes him” allowing his soul to break free from the material body in order to reach enlightenment. Through his actions, Judas has set Jesus free. Only he has finally understood – “he has received Jesus’ mysterious revelation and is about to do Jesus’ mysterious will.” In a Gnostic understanding, Judas is the hero of his time, not the villain.76

As the story draws to a close, the canonical and Judas gospel storylines converge as Judas approaches the high priests. He gives the priests the information they need in exchange for money.

[...] Their high priests murmured because [he] had gone into the guest room for his prayer. But some scribes were there watching carefully in order to arrest him during the prayer, for they were afraid of the people, since he was regarded by all as a prophet. They approached Judas and said to him, “What are you doing here? You are Jesus’ disciple.” Judas answered them as they wished. And he received some money and handed him over to them.

We are not told what information the priests are seeking, for they do not explicitly state this. Neither are we told how much money Judas is given for his deed. This section can be compared to the canonical accounts, though a much lesser version in detail. This section seems to allude that the Gospel of Judas does, in fact, fit within the story line of the New Testament gospels, but is just an account that happens behind the scenes of Jesus’ teachings.

75 Ehrman, 96.
76 The Gnostics worked to redeem each of the lesser characters in the Bible throughout the century.
Finally, the Gospel ends with the statement “the Gospel of Judas.” The statement does not read “The Gospel According to Judas,” therefore we can predict that this gospel was meant to be written about Judas, not written in his name as an account of what he might have said. This clarification suggests that this text was proclaiming the good news about Judas much like the canon proclaims the good news about Jesus.77 Ultimately, Judas himself becomes the focal point of this text, whether he is transformed to the hero or remains the villain as different scholars argue.

As introduced through earlier footnotes, New Testament and Gnostic Text scholars face much debate around this story. Marvin Meyer, one of the original translators of the text, believes the Gospel of Judas to be significant to the study of Judas and of religion. He emphasizes that “It is a rare occurrence that a previously unknown gospel manuscript is discovered, particularly one that was mentioned in early Christian sources.” Meyer suggests that the Gospel of Judas is “an early source for our knowledge of an important mystical movement within early Christianity and Judaism, namely the Sethian Gnostic school of religious thought.” It introduces us to Gnostic belief and tells an in-depth story about a character who was quickly introduced in the more recognized canonical gospels. The Gospel of Judas text “provides the opportunity to evaluate, and perhaps reevaluate, the historical role of a figure—Judas Iscariot—who has been much maligned within Christianity and has been a prominent figure in the development of anti-Semitism. All in all, the Gospel of Judas sheds important light on the character of developing Christianity, and reminds us again of the rich diversity of the

77 Ehrman, 98.
early church." Marvin Meyer suggests that the Gospel of Judas allows us to question what we have been told, in realizing that there is always more than one side of a story.

Another New Testament scholar, Bart Ehrman has a more extreme view of the Gospel of Judas. Ehrman suggests "this gospel has a completely different understanding of God, the world, Jesus, salvation, human existence – not to mention Judas himself – than what came to be embodied in the orthodox Christian canon and creeds." He believes that the Gospel of Judas has drastically changed Christian ideas.

April DeConick has very a very drastic view opposite to Ehrman's, She refutes all ideas brought forth by Meyer and Ehrman saying that we must look at the translation more closely. She legitimizes that the introduction of the Gospel of Judas is a step forward for our understanding of the early church, but that the meaning of the text is not what other scholars have stated. DeConick worked to translate the text on her own and found" that the actual meaning is vastly different. While National Geographic's translation supported the provocative interpretation of Judas as a hero, a more careful reading makes clear that Judas is not only no hero, he is a demon." She does not seem to believe that a new Judas character emerges through the retelling of his story. She instead argues that the idea of an evil Judas is supported if not intensified by this account.

In their reading of this text, Gnosticism scholars Karen King and Elaine Pagels remain somewhere between these two extremes. In their volume, Reading Judas: the Gospel of Judas

78 Marvin Meyer http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/Marvin_Meyer.html
80 DeConick, 4.
and the Shaping of Christianity they raise the point that at the time when Gnostic texts were being authored, strong emotions accompanied an environment of persecution for "heresy." While the Gospel of Judas has been labeled a piece of fiction intended to confuse people, King points out that the canon was also written by a group of people who wanted a unified church that focused on only a few chosen doctrines. King and Pagels credit Judas for being the first Christian martyr. His standing in society "dies" when he betrays Jesus to make the crucifixion events a possibility. Further than this, they discuss his martyrdom being confirmed in the Gospel of Judas through the disciples stoning Judas for his actions. Taken together, the main question that the scholars seem to pose is this: what makes the Gospel of Judas so inferior to the canon in the eyes of Christian followers?

The Gnostic Tradition: A Brief Overview

At a time when the Christian bishops focused on enforcing laws that delineated a strict reading of texts, the Gnostic tradition emphasized on the intuitive process of knowing oneself, thus gaining a deeper knowledge of God than what they received through the general Christian tradition. Why were the people of the time developing characters that the earlier canonical gospels left in the shadows? In the Greek language the term gnosis means knowledge, and

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81 Greek gnosis means knowledge. Agnostic means "not knowing," as in claiming to know nothing about ultimate reality. Gnosis is not rational knowledge. The Greeks differentiate between scientific reflective knowledge and observation experiential knowledge. The scientific knowledge is not gnosis, while the observational knowledge is gnosis. Gnosis is the same as insight, or the intuitive process of knowing oneself; knowing the self leads to knowing...
the Gnostic people believed their religion to be one of insight. Much like the eastern traditions before them, these early Christians stopped searching for God in Heaven and instead followed the ideals of “know yourself” in experiencing the emotions of the present moment. They argue that only through self-knowledge can one find God and a positive afterlife.

As Gnostics began to compose texts of their own, they used the voices of canonical underdogs to critique the status quo. These texts portrayed characters such as “Doubting” Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Judas Iscariot as heroes of their time. One can argue that the Gnostics found these characters symbolic of their struggles countering the canonical heroes as symbolically embodied in bishops and heads of the church. In turn, many of the canonical heroes and Peter especially are portrayed villains in the Gnostic gospels. Those within the Gnostic tradition seem to be sending a message to the people and the bishops of the time. These texts were later dubbed heretical by the heads of the church.

What Does All of This Mean?

We may never know the true story behind the actions of Judas Iscariot – whether he handed Jesus over because of his greed, was possessed by the devil, or Jesus himself asked Judas to alert the authorities. Whether Judas was a betrayer or a best friend to Jesus is a question that can never be directly answered. What we can establish with certainty, however,
is the manner in which the New Testament canon has shaped so much of what we consider truth.

At the minimum, the existence of the Gospel of Judas suggests that what is named as "truth" may in fact have facets that no one has ever questioned. If the Gospel of Judas introduces one character in a different light, then there may be others who have also been misrepresented throughout history.

Of course, contradictions between canonical texts have been evident from the day these texts were written. When the extra-canonical texts are introduced the challenge of reading historically is increased. Yet in the end, do not all of the authors and all of these texts contribute to a bigger picture, a more meaningful lesson? King and Pagels suggest that the Gospel of Judas and other extracanonical texts "let us hear voices that have been lost for over 1500 years, silenced by those who won the name of Orthodoxy for themselves." These texts "go beyond the stereotypes that come from hearing only one side of the story – a version told so often for so long that it has wrongly come to seem like the only possible story." What these texts underscore is that the truth doesn't have to be fact; it merely has to be believable. Derivatively, much of what we appear to know is based on who has been telling us the story. Read in this light, Judas challenges us to take every piece, no matter its credentials, with caution and decide for ourselves what makes the most sense.

\[^{82}\text{Pagels and King, xiv.}\]
\[^{83}\text{King and Pagels, xv}\]
Works Cited


