



QUESTION: I heard the new discovery of the gospel of Judas may shake everything we know about Judas. Does it really give reliable info about Judas and Jesus?

ANSWER: The gospel of Judas tells us something about Gnosticism, a 2nd century Christian sect, but tells us next to nothing we can really trust about the real Judas or Jesus. The Judas gospel was found a couple decades ago, and it was just recently released to the public after some travels on the black market. But we've always known about its existence, because it was referred to by Irenaeus, an early church father, who referred to it in 180 AD. He called it "fictitious history". So in this sense it is not a "new" discovery.

The copy we uncovered is dated to about 300 AD. The original was therefore written probably in the mid to late second century – Irenaeus' comment is our main reason for dating it around 150 AD. If it's not the same Judas gospel (a possibility scholars say) then it may have been written later in the 3rd century. In any event it was written no closer than 100 YEARS after the biblical gospels and 120 years from the events it purports to describe. We can be sure it was not written by Judas - who killed himself in 33 AD.

It was common in the 2nd century to write letters in the name of some famous person - they were called, Pseudopigraphy, or "false letters". Many Gnostic gospels were written in the name of famous people: Thomas, Peter, Mary, etc. These Gnostics believed that matter was evil and only spirit good. Therefore Jesus could not truly have come in the flesh, but as a mere phantom that only appeared in human form from time to time. This explains the theology behind the most famous line quoted from Judas:

Jesus: "you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me."

The 'man' referred to by Jesus is the evil flesh prison that temporarily houses the "Christ essence" and Judas is a hero for liberating the Christ from this decrepit flesh. Gnostics had a very low view not only of flesh but of the O.T. God who created the physical world. And so a subgroup of Gnostics, called Cainites, had a habit of turning O.T. villains into heroes because they opposed the evil God of the Jews. (ex. Cain, Sodomites etc.)

Thus, in making Judas a hero and having Jesus condemn evil flesh, the gospel of Judas is interesting, but utterly unsurprising. It fits everything we already knew about Gnostic teaching. The discovery of the gospel of Judas and other Gnostic texts has increased our understanding of Gnostic beliefs and, in a backhanded way, our confidence in the integrity of early church fathers. Though they were very critical of the Gnostics and thought of them as heretics, they accurately and objectively summarized their teachings in their refutations.

But more significantly, Judas tells us nothing new or reliable about the historical Jesus or Judas. It, along with other Gnostic texts, were ALL written long after the New Testament gospels. When looking at any ancient writings, obviously those that are written closer to the events they describe are generally going to be more accurate than those written 100 years later. If the gospel of Judas says something different than Matthew, Luke, Mark or John, which ought we to trust? Writings written 30 to 60 years after the events, or 130 to 160 years after?



The Gnostic gospels, far from being revolutionary new sources of information about Jesus are transparently dependant on the NT gospels (they recapitulate NT sayings and history but then give them a Greek philosophical spin). The gospel of Judas has strong Greek philosophical leanings, which begs the question: which set of gospels more accurately depicts a movement that started in early 1st century Jerusalem? The ones that are written in the 2nd century, with a strong sense of Greek dualism, or the ones written in the 1st century with a strong sense of Jewish, Old Testament spirituality? Again choosing isn't difficult.

These gospels are also transparently designed to give some credence and authority to the unique and late developing Gnostic ideas. For example, in the gospel of Mary, we can read a portion that shows just how conspicuously Peter (whose Jewish vision of Jesus was well established by that time, circa 150 AD) submits to Mary (who holds the Gnostic secrets!):

Peter said to Mary, Sister we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of woman. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember which you know, but we do not, nor have we heard them. Mary answered and said, What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you.

Well, isn't that convenient! Peter didn't know who Jesus REALLY was, Mary did! These transparent maneuvers by Gnostics to overthrow the Orthodox church are evidence of which version of Jesus was more ancient and which was late developing. The fact that the Gnostics did not have history on their side was used repeatedly by the church fathers as they attempted to refute them. Tertullian (circ 175):

What is to settle the point for us, except if be that principle of time, which rules that the authority lies with that which shall be found to be more ancient...

The gospel of Judas is an interesting find. It gives us more details about the diverse off shoots of Christianity in the 2nd century. But it does not show that a better, more historically reliable version of Jesus' story was available which just happened to be excluded from orthodoxy for political reasons.

Imagine if 2000 years from now they dig up all the many books of Mormonism in Utah. Should they rightly assume that this is a version of Christianity on an equal historical footing with orthodox Christianity? With Gnostic writings this is exactly what we have: A geographically and theologically narrow and late developing movement inside of Egypt that was soundly and broadly condemned by mainstream voices in the Church. And in support of the offshoot movement we have newer and fewer stories of Jesus, with clear Greek philosophical corruption, while in support of the orthodox view we have the most, the oldest, and the best preserved data about Jesus.

If it's a race, it's not even close. The four fold gospel wins against the Gnostic gospels hands down.