

**Judas, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. X7060528**  
**Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 and John 17:6-19**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 28 May, 2006**

The big news of the religious world just before Easter 2006 was the revealing of the discovery of the actual text of the Gospel of Judas. The news was prevalent and one of our members asked if I would preach a sermon about Judas. So, here it is. The lectionary readings from the New Testament for this Sunday both refer to Judas. Acts describes the Disciples' replacement of Judas with Matthias. John quotes Jesus' talking about the disciple who was lost.

Since the time of the Gospel of John, Judas has been perceived as evil, perhaps the most evil person of all time. His name is synonymous with traitor and he has been connected with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The Gospel of Judas turns this perception upside down, saying that Judas only did what Jesus asked him to do. By revealing Jesus to the Roman authorities, and leading to his death, Judas allowed Jesus to be freed from his body so that he could become what he really was. The important line in the gospel of Judas is this: "You will be greater than all the others, Judas, you will sacrifice the man that clothes me."<sup>1</sup> This meant that the real Jesus would be released as spirit at the instant of the crucifixion.

The Gospel of Judas was a Gnostic writing. The word "gnostic" comes from the Greek *gnosis*, which means knowledge. But this kind of knowledge is not everyday knowledge, it is not book learning. It is insight, intuition, that ability to know something about yourself, to know that you have a spark the divine inside of you. Gnostics believed that all things material, including our bodies, and the natural world, are evil. This natural world was created by an evil god, the god of the Hebrew scriptures, or what we commonly refer to as the Old Testament. Only the realm of the spirit is good. That is the realm created by the God of the New Testament.

You can understand where that thought comes from when you read some of the writings of Paul, who said, "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."<sup>2</sup> It is not a long jump from there to the teachings of the Gnostics that the body and the things of this world are not good and that they are to be escaped. If Jesus is divine and good, than he couldn't have been a part of this evil world.

The widespread interest in the discovery of the Gospel of Judas gives us a lesson in how our Bible came to be. As I have said before, this text that is so important to our faith did not drop down from heaven in the King James Version of English. It is the product of the development of faith over two thousand years, and if we were honest we would say four thousand years, including the history and traditions of the Christian faith. It developed through oral stories and teachings, then writings on goatskin and papyrus in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It was translated into Coptic, Latin, German and English. The books were sifted, sorted, and finally canonized by Jewish rabbis and Christian bishops. Finally, it is read by you and by me in various translations like the New International and New Revised Standard versions.

Bishop Irenaeus in about 180 AD listed the four gospels as the only ones that Christians should read. Athanasius, in 367 listed the twenty-seven books that should make up the New Testament. He specifically forbade the reading of the Gospel of Judas, hence, we knew that it existed at his time. In this way, did early church leaders sift and standardize the Christian faith.

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Cockburn, *National Geographic*, May, 2006, page 84

<sup>2</sup>Romans 8:6

So what does it do to your faith when you hear the news of the discovery of a new gospel such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, or the Gospel of Judas? Does it bother you to know that a gospel was left out of our Bible? Does it disturb you to think that a few old men sitting in a back room decided which books should be in the Bible and which should not?

There is a perceived threat to the Christian faith, on the part of many, from Dan Brown's *DaVinci Code* and the Gospel of Judas. If you start with doctrines such as biblical inerrancy, and strict fundamentalisms, your faith will be shattered as you study and learn more about how this Bible came to us. This is what happened to Bart Ehrman, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UNC Chapel Hill.

This best-selling author, a New Testament expert, was a "fundamentalist scholar who peered so hard into the origins of Christianity that he lost his faith altogether," according to an article in the *Washington Post*.<sup>3</sup>

Once he was a seminarian and graduate of the Moody Bible Institute, a pillar of conservative Christianity. Its doctrine states that the Bible 'is a divine revelation, the original autographs of which were verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit.' But after three decades of research into that divine revelation, Ehrman became an agnostic. What he found in the ancient papyri of the scriptorium was not the greatest story ever told, but the crumbling dust of his own faith.<sup>4</sup>

If you start, on the other hand, with a belief that God is love, you end up somewhere else. If you read the scriptures with an open and questioning mind, you might find yourself discovering new elements of faith. If you go with the humility of Jesus as opposed to the certainty of "biblical truths," you can drink from streams of living waters. If you believe that Jesus is the ideal human being, you will begin to follow his actions and his teachings, knowing that we too, are capable of love and compassion. If you listen to the teachings of Jesus about loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself, and turning the other cheek, and doing to others what you would like them do to you, you may be closer to doing what God intends us to be doing. If you believe that we will be judged by Jesus according to how we treat the least of those who are his brothers and sisters, then you will have a rock-firm foundation of faith. You will have little to worry about as you delve into the formation of the canon of the Bible or into Church history.

To know that there were Gnostics in the Second Century AD is to realize that Christianity was diverse. It is a religion of diversities today. We must respect one another as we seek to draw closer to the reality of God.

Let us close this morning with some additional thoughts about Judas. I don't think Judas was the hero portrayed in the Gospel of Judas. Nor, do I think Judas was the evil betrayer that Christian tradition has vilified him as. It is too easy to heap such evil on one figure. We are good at that, of making scapegoats out of others. We're good at blaming and pointing the finger.

I believe that Judas was much like you and I are. I believe that Judas was a Zealot who was anxious to rid Israel of Roman rule. I believe that Judas put too much stock into Jesus as a person who could inspire the Jewish crowds into armed rebellion— that's what the Palm Sunday fuss was all about. I believe that Judas thought that if he provoked Jesus in front of the soldiers who came to arrest him, that he would finally act as the military son of the great King David and throw off Roman rule. I believe that Judas committed the error that we also are capable of, that of making Jesus into what he wanted Jesus to be.

I think we must strive to act more like Jesus and less like Judas.

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<sup>3</sup>By Neely Tucker, *Washington Post* Staff Writer, Sunday, March 5, 2006; Page D01

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.