

# A Brief Overview of the Gospel of Judas

*Dr. Patrick Zukeran explains why the Gospel of Judas poses no threat to the Bible or to Christianity; it only provides insight into early Gnosticism.*

Newspaper headlines all over the world reported that the lost *Gospel of Judas* has been recovered and translated. Reporters state that this gospel sheds new light on the life of Christ and His relationship with Judas who may not be the traitor portrayed in the New Testament Gospels. In fact he may be the hero! He is cast as the most senior and trusted of Jesus' disciples who betrayed Jesus at the Lord's request! This gospel further states that Jesus revealed secret knowledge to Judas instructing him to turn Jesus over to the Roman authorities. So rather than acting out of greed or Satanic influence, Judas was faithfully following the orders given to him by Christ. Does the *Gospel of Judas* reveal a new twist to the passion story of Christ? Are there new historic insights that should have Christians concerned?

The *Gospel of Judas* was discovered in 1978 by a farmer in a cave near El Minya in central Egypt. Scholars date this Coptic text to have been written between A.D. 300 and 400.<sup>{1}</sup> Most scholars believe the original text was written in Greek and that the original manuscript was written in middle second century.<sup>{2}</sup>

The authorship of this gospel is unknown but it is unlikely that Judas or a disciple of Christ wrote it. It represents Gnostic thought that began to flourish around that time. The earliest mention of it is from Irenaeus writing in 180 A.D. who condemned this work as heretical.

The *Gospel of Judas* is similar to the Gnostic literature found in other areas along the Nile, including the Nag Hammadi library that contained nearly forty-five Gnostic texts, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Peter* and other texts.

## What is Gnosticism?

Gnosticism flourished from the second to the fourth century A.D. What is Gnosticism? Gnosticism derives its title from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge and refers to the mystical or secret knowledge of God and the oneness of self with God. Here is a basic summary of Gnostic philosophy.<sup>{3}</sup>

First, Gnosticism taught the secret knowledge of dualism that the material world was evil and the spiritual realm was pure. Second, God is not distinct from man but mankind is, in essence, divine. God is the spirit and light within the individual. When one understood self, one understood all. Third, the fundamental problem in Gnosticism was not sin but ignorance. The way to attain oneness with the divine was by attaining mystical knowledge. Fourth, salvation was reached by gaining secret knowledge, or *gnosis* of the real nature of the world and of the self. Fifth, the goal in Gnosticism was unity with God. This came through escaping the prison of the impure body in order for the soul of the individual to travel through space avoiding hostile demons, and uniting with God.

In reference to Jesus, Gnosticism taught that Jesus was not distinct from His disciples. Those who attained Gnostic insight became a Christ like Jesus. Princeton University professor of religion Dr. Elaine Pagels writes, "Whoever achieves *gnosis* becomes no longer a Christian but a Christ."<sup>{4}</sup> So Jesus was not the unique Son of God and a savior who would die for the sins of the world, but a teacher who revealed secret knowledge to worthy followers.

Gnostic philosophy is contrary to Old and New Testament teachings. The Bible is in opposition to Gnostic teaching on fundamental doctrines such as the nature of God, Christ, the material world, sin, salvation, and eternity. Jews and Christians rejected Gnostic teaching as heretical, and the Gnostics rejected Christianity. Gnostic philosophy is what is taught throughout the *Gospel of Judas*. Like other Gnostic literature, there is very little similarity between the *Gospel of Judas* and the New Testament writings. This gospel contradicts the New Testament in major ways.

## Contents of the Gospel of Judas

Gnostic philosophy is contrary to biblical Christianity, and the *Gospel of Judas* reflects Gnostic thought rather than biblical theology. An example of Gnostic philosophy is reflected in the mission of Jesus as portrayed in this gospel.

Dr. Marvin Meyer, professor of Bible at Chapman College, summarizes the goal of Jesus' mission according to this gospel.

"For Jesus in the *Gospel of Judas*, death is no tragedy, nor is it a necessary evil to bring about forgiveness of sins.... Death, as the exit from this absurd physical existence, is not to be feared or dreaded. Far from being an occasion of sadness, death is the means by which Jesus is liberated from the flesh in order that he might return to his heavenly home, and by betraying Jesus, Judas helps his friend discard his body and free his inner self, the divine self." {5}

In the New Testament, Jesus' mission is clearly stated. He came to die an atoning death for the sins of the world and conquer the grave with His bodily resurrection. This contradicts the *Gospel of Judas* that teaches Christ sought death to free himself from the imprisonment of his body.

Another Gnostic fundamental teaching is that the problem of man is not sin but ignorance. Jesus is not a savior but a teacher who reveals this secret knowledge only to those worthy of this insight. Judas is considered worthy of this knowledge. Dr. Meyer writes,

"For Gnostics, the fundamental problem in human life is not sin but ignorance, and the best way to address this problem is not through faith but through knowledge. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus imparts to Judas - and to the readers of the gospel - the knowledge that can eradicate ignorance and lead to an awareness of oneself and God." {6}

Another Gnostic teaching is that since the physical world is evil, God did not create the physical world. Instead, He creates aeons and angels who in turn create, bring order to, and rule over the physical world. Since matter is impure, God does not enter directly into physical creation. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus asks His disciples, "How do you know me?" They are unable to answer correctly. However, Judas answers saying, "I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo."

Barbelo in Gnosticism is the first emanation of God, often described as a mother-father figure. Since God does not enter into the material world because it is impure, Barbelo is an intermediary realm from which the material world can be created without contaminating God. {7}

Barbelo is clearly a Gnostic term and foreign to Christianity. Jesus stated in John 3:13 that He is from heaven. The Greek word is *houranos*. Other times, the New Testament writers see Jesus as sitting at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is from heaven with His Father with whom He dwells eternally.

## Reasons the Gospel of Judas is Not Part of the New Testament

There are several reasons we should not consider the *Gospel of Judas* inspired scripture. First, it is written too late to have any apostolic connection. The Apostles of Christ were given the authority to write inspired scripture. One of the requirements for inclusion in the New Testament canon was that the book had to be written by an apostle or a close associate. Since an apostolic connection was necessary, it would have to have been written within the first century. There is compelling evidence that the four New Testament Gospels are written in the first century A.D. (See my article "Historical Reliability of the Gospels.") The *Gospel of Judas* is written in mid-second century A.D. so it is too late to be apostolic.

Second, inspired literature must be consistent with previous revelation. God is not a God of error but of truth, and His word would not present contradictory truth claims. The Gnostic philosophy in Judas is inconsistent with Old and New Testament teachings.

The Old Testament teaches that God created the physical universe and Adam and Eve (Genesis 1-3). In the Genesis creation account, God created all things good. So contrary to Gnosticism, God created the physical world and He declared it good.

Gnosticism teaches that God would not create a physical universe because the material world is impure, so God creates aeons and angels. These beings in turn create the physical realm. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus reveals to Judas the creation of the world, humanity, and numerous aeons and angels. The angels bring order to the chaos. One of the angels, Saklas, fashioned Adam and Eve. The Gospel reads:

"Let twelve angels come into the being to rule over chaos and the [underworld]. And look, from the cloud there appeared an [angel] whose face flashed with fire and whose appearance was defiled with blood. His name was Nebro, which means rebel; others call him Yaldabaoth. Another angel, Saklas, also came from the cloud. So Nebro created six angels - as well as Saklas - to be assistants, and these produced twelve angels in the heavens, with each one receiving a portion in the heavens."

It further states,

"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.'"

This contradicts the teaching in the Old Testament that God Himself created the universe. Then God created Adam from the earth, and his wife Eve from Adam.

The *Gospel of Judas* contradicts New Testament teaching as well. The Gospel teaches that the body is evil and that Jesus wished to escape His physical body. Jesus instructs Judas saying, "But you (Judas) will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." Jesus' death through the assistance of Judas would liberate His spirit to unite with God. {8}

However, the New Testament teaches that Jesus did not wish to escape His body. In fact, Jesus taught that His resurrection would be a physical resurrection (John 2:19-22). In Luke 24:39, Jesus makes clear to His disciples that He has a physical body. "See my hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." In John 20 and 21, Jesus reveals it was a physical resurrection of the body that was on the cross. He invites Thomas in chapter 20 to touch His scars. If Jesus rose as a spirit, He would have been guilty of deceiving His disciples.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches a physical resurrection. He explains that Christ rose from the dead and over five hundred witnesses attested to the fact. He then explains that the resurrection body is a physical body but different from our earthly bodies. At the resurrection, Christians will have glorified physical bodies, a clear contradiction to Gnosticism that seeks to escape the impure physical body. Paul did not teach Christians to escape the body, but look forward to the resurrection of the body (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the hype in the media, the *Gospel of Judas* does not affect the historical reliability of the Gospels nor does it pose any threat to the deity of Christ. This gospel cannot be considered inspired scripture like the New Testament books. It was written in the late second century and therefore, not written by an Apostle of Christ or a close associate. Its teachings contradict previous revelation of the Old and New Testament. It presents very little information that could be considered historical. The *Gospel of Judas* gives us more insight into early Gnosticism, that is all. It presents no historic facts of Jesus that affect the New Testament in any way.

## **Notes**

1. Dan Vergano and Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Long-lost gospel of Judas casts 'traitor' in new light," *USA Today*, 7 April 2006.
2. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C.: *National Geographic*, 2006), 5.
3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 119-141.
4. Pagels, 134.
5. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, 4-5.
6. *Ibid.*, 7.
7. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbelo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbelo)  
Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, 43.