

# 2nd Opinion: Biblical Gospels repudiate Judas

April 13, 2006  
Posted: 4/13/06

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**By David Garland**

I am fully convinced the manuscript of the so-called *Gospel of Judas* is authentic, but so what? Sensationalized blurbs breathlessly trying to pump sales of new books about this manuscript tease the potential buyer: “If Judas had not betrayed Jesus, Jesus would not have been handed over to the authorities, crucified, buried and raised from the dead. Could it be that without Judas, the Easter miracle would never have happened?” Such questions are poppycock.

Before addressing the question that is most often asked, “Why did Judas betray Jesus?” we need to ask, “What did Judas betray?”

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According to John 11:57, the priestly hierarchy, threatened by Jesus’ popularity and attacks on the status quo, put out an APB: “If any one knew where Jesus was, he should let them know so that they could arrest him.” Jesus showed up in Jerusalem with great fanfare and held court in the temple, much to the dismay of the authorities. Their overt hostility may explain the cloak-and-dagger flavor of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples

regarding the preparations for the Last Supper—“Find a man carrying a jar of water and follow him” (Mark 14:13). Jesus took precautions, and Judas, the treasurer of this outfit, was not allowed to make the preparations for the celebration, which would have seemed to have been part of his function. Therefore, he did not know where Jesus would meet with his disciples in Jerusalem for what would be their last meal. He did know the place of their gathering after the supper. That week, Jesus had gone each night to the same place (Luke 22:39).

The priestly hierarchy feared arresting Jesus in the midst of the throng of pilgrims who filled Jerusalem during Passover lest it spark a riot, and they resolved to arrest him by stealth (Mark 14:1-2). Judas solved their crowd-control problems by letting them know when and where they could seize him without causing a commotion. Judas led the posse to the spot, and this nighttime arrest circumvented a public outcry. Had Judas not cooperated, the leaders still could have nabbed Jesus any time during the day when he openly taught in the temple. It would have been messier, perhaps, but they did not really need Judas to get the job done.

How could Judas be viewed as a hero? The ancient Gnostic Gospels uncovered in Egypt (and there are many) are the second century antithesis of the novel *The Da Vinci Code* and just as historically unreliable. As *The Da Vinci Code* wants to make Jesus more human and have offspring from a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene, the Gnostic writings from this era wanted to divorce Jesus from the fleshly sphere. Gnostics believed that an eternal spirit was trapped within this earthbound, mortal body. *The Gospel of Judas* fits this outlook. The figure of Judas can become an exemplary character, because he helps engineer Jesus' death that allows him to escape the flesh and become true spirit.

Why were such works rejected in the church? The more one is hostile to anything related to matter, the less one is inclined to have anything to do with the belief and confession that God became a man. The more

redemption is transferred to the region of knowledge, the less significant is the redemptive work of Christ in his death and resurrection. The more redemption is related to the purely spiritual realm, the less one is concerned about ethics, what one does in the body. The more saving knowledge is expected as a personal illumination from God, the less sympathy one has for revelation that came only once in the Son of God becoming human and in the historic testimony of his apostles.

The assumption was that my personal revelation is better than that accepted by the majority of Christian circles. The suppression of such works by other Christians was not some nefarious plot to squelch the truth but an attempt to preserve the truth.

Why did Judas betray Jesus?

The Gospel of Mark gives us no reason. Mark only emphasizes the shock and shame that he was one of the Twelve. The impact is subtle: If one of the Twelve could do something like this for whatever reason, then any of us might fall by the wayside for all the multiple reasons tugging at our souls.

According to Matthew, greed was the chief motive. Judas is the first to raise the issue of money with the chief priests: "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" (Matthew 26:15). They offer 30 pieces of silver, a paltry sum that contrasts sharply with the fortune in perfumed ointment that an anonymous woman poured out on Jesus as a token of her love and worship.

Luke tells us that Satan entered Judas (Luke 22:33). How else to explain it? Satan, Luke tells us, wanted to sift Peter, and he wound up denying his Lord three times. Judas apparently was sifted as well and succumbed in an even worse way.

The Gospel of John gives us both reasons. Satan entered him (John 13:2, 27), and he was a thief and money grubber (John 12:6).

Dostoevsky writes in *The Idiot*: “The causes of human actions are usually immeasurably more complex than are our subsequent explanations of them, and can rarely be distinctly discerned.” I suspect, however, that most explanations that seek to go beyond what is given in the Gospels are motivated by a human desire to get Judas (along with Pilate and everyone else in the story) off the hook. If we can get Judas off the hook, then we can get ourselves off the hook as well. No one is responsible for Christ’s death—leaving only God to take the blame.

That is not the perspective of the canonical gospels.

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