

Why the Church Invented Judas's "Betrayal" of Jesus

By Gerd Lüdemann

At a time of enthusiasm over the newly discovered Gospel of Judas, Gerd Lüdemann demonstrates that historical-critical analysis of traditional New Testament texts is able to unlock other facts of the Judas story

The name of Judas, presumably a man from Kerioth in southern Judea, still bears powerful negative connotations today in societies shaped by Christianity. In everyday language, the name "Judas" means "traitor"; in Germany it is not even permitted to call a child Judas. In our societal memory, the name is associated with a heinous crime because the New Testament gospels in various ways portray Judas Iscariot as having handed over the Son of God to his enemies. As early as the latter half of the first century, Christians had decided that such a crime could not go unpunished, and therefore offered various depictions of the traitor's horrible fate.

The historical-critical investigation of the Judas-story has produced a powerful scholarly consensus concerning the intentions of the gospel-writers. Proceeding from the assumption that Matthew and Luke independently use as a source Mark, the oldest extant gospel, and that John's gospel was the last written, the following result emerges. With respect to *Judas's plan to deliver Jesus to his enemies*, Mark reports that Judas contacted Jewish authorities hostile to Jesus. Matthew follows this line, and furnishes a motive: greed. Luke likewise "improves on" Mark, reporting that Satan has occupied Judas. John straight-out compares Judas to a devil.

As concerns *Jesus' prediction that Judas will "betray" him* the following differentiation in thought is discernible: The first three evangelists consider Jesus' foresight of Judas's plan as proof of his omniscience, whereas John relates it to the cosmic antithesis of light and darkness. Here light defeats darkness, and as the representative of darkness, Judas comes to personify terror.

While reports commonly agree on *Judas's connivance in the arrest of Jesus* and stress his malice, there are striking peculiarities – decorative touches and exaggerated aspects – to the story as presented in John's gospel. For in it Judas is in charge of a large group of people, among whom are servants of the Temple hierarchy and 600 fully armed Roman soldiers. Incredibly, the group reacts to Jesus' identifying himself by falling at his feet – a detail reminiscent of Johannine propaganda, to dramatize the power and dignity of the "Son of God."

Furthermore, the two *New Testament reports about Judas's death* are contradictory. Referring to Old Testament prophecies, Matthew describes Judas's suicide, while in the Acts of

the Apostles, Luke describes Judas's body as bursting open, with his intestines gushing out. In both cases the villain would be suffering a deservedly terrible death. Along with the other New Testament reports about Judas, these two stories must be classified as legendary, and thus worthless as historical material. Moreover, and significantly, this latter judgment can be applied with even more force to the newly discovered and widely discussed Gospel of Judas. For its narrative uncritically takes the New Testament gospels and the Acts of the Apostles as a given framework. In addition, the dialogues in the main body of the text reflect the "heretical" second-century Gnostic theology that regarded Judas as a hero and intimate disciple of Jesus.

It is both unfortunate and surprising that in the discussion of Judas two points have received so little attention. First, and most critical, the Greek verb *paradidōmi*, commonly translated as "to betray," should in fact be rendered as "to hand over" or "to deliver (up)." Second, the earliest extant account of Jesus' arrest appears in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written about two decades before Mark. The account forms part of the Lord's Supper tradition which was relayed to Paul about three years after the crucifixion, and subsequently transmitted to the Corinthian community during his first visit there (mid-first century). The traditional text begins: "The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was delivered up...." It would hardly have been possible for those who originally heard this phrase to miss the allusion to the suffering servant from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah – the servant punished by God for the sake of the faith-community. In this allusion then, the first Christians would have recognized a prophecy of the sufferings of Jesus. Thus Paul uses the prophetic text to reinforce that God had consigned Jesus, the true Suffering Servant, to death, for the sake of Christian believers. In fact, this interpretation dates from the earliest days of Paul's mission (mid-thirties) and permeates the earliest Christian confessions. Yet the "delivering up," at this stage of the tradition-history, carries with it a theological significance that has nothing to do with the treachery of a scoundrel. Rather, it recalls belief-stances and formulas from much earlier times; and it is not to be read into the story of Judas or the Last Supper at all.

Another point to counter such a misinterpretation is that Judas is listed as one of the Twelve. And it is this group – all twelve – who reportedly were the first to behold the risen Jesus. Jesus founded them, the group of specifically Twelve, as a symbol of the imminent restitution of the Twelve tribes of Israel. No wonder, then, that, following the shock of Jesus' death, this very circle, with Cephas (Peter) at its head, were the group to witness the "risen" Jesus. Moreover, this appearance is reported in a credal formula passed on to Paul, immediately after his conversion, as part of the tradition – as in the case of the Last Supper-tradition – and

relayed by him to the Corinthian community during his first visit. In light of these observations, it is highly unlikely that Judas, as a member of the Twelve, would have been identified in earliest accounts as the "betrayers" of Jesus.

Later textual witnesses conform to the Gospel of Matthew on this point, correcting Paul's writing by changing the appearance from "before the Twelve" to "before the Eleven." Similarly, in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reports the election of a twelfth disciple to fill the place left empty by Judas. And in both cases the harmonization is clearly intended to incorporate a secondary tradition of Judas as "betrayers."

It was not until the early Christians tried to undergird the theological interpretation of the Passion story with "historical" details – partly to draw attention away from the embarrassing delay in Jesus' Second Coming – that they began to look for a concrete person who may have delivered Jesus to the enemy. They chose the disciple Judas, from Kerioth in southern Judea. After all, who could better symbolize the Jewish people (Judas/Judea/Jews) – the collective scapegoats for the church, accused from the beginning for their role in Jesus' death? And it must be remarked that, from this tragic point on, the theologically if not Biblically positive side of Jesus' act as the suffering Servant ("Jesus' blood shed for you") became distorted by the supplanting of a negative, and ultimately destructive interpretation to the verb *paradidōmi*. Judas is transformed from one symbolic representative of the Twelve Tribes to the placard-bearing traitor, the Jew from Kerioth of Judea. Thus Judas and the Jews become, in one abysmal mistranslation and a self-serving cataclysmic theological decision of an insecure Institution, grossly stylized monsters – a grotesque miscarriage of justice whose significance can only be measured with inadequate reference to centuries of cultural abuse and horrendous mistreatment still under scrutiny today.

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