

The New Testament Apocrypha The *Gospel of Judas* as a Case Study

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Anyone who has tried to study the Apocrypha is faced not only with a vast amount of literature that comprises divergent genres and subject matter, but also the difficult and still unresolved questions regarding its definition, its nature and the time limits within which this literature falls; not to mention the complex relation with the canonical writings, the nature of canonicity, inspiration and Church authority. Indeed the very term “apocrypha” itself is not unanimously understood by Catholics and Protestants and each use it differently. The apparently easiest definition of “apocrypha” as designating works that are not included in the canon of Christian Scripture would only raise more questions – which canon? Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox all hold canons that are somewhat different from each other.

These complex issues were highlighted at the much publicized “discovery” of the *Gospel of Judas* in 2006 by the National Geographic Society – touted as a challenge to mainstream Christianity to reopen discussion and research on the origins of Christianity and its theology.

The term “apocrypha”, from “apokrypto” in Greek, means “hidden, secret” and designates a writing that is not recognized as authentic. In dealing with books of the Bible the term means a book not accepted into the canon (= list) and not considered as part of the Christian Holy Scriptures. In Protestant circles the term also includes the books of the Old Testament translated from the Greek version of the Septuagint but not preserved in Hebrew.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 2nd century CE) first used the word “apocrypha” to denote “heresy” and “false”, i.e. the Gnostic writings that he was fighting against; and which were so understood by the early Fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries.¹ The word later acquired the meaning of “secret teaching”, usually referring to works of an apocalyptic nature containing esoteric instructions.² As such it designates a large diversity of texts including gospels, letters, acts, apocalypses, sayings and instructions.

A study of this *Gospel of Judas* will shed a little light on some aspects that characterize apocryphal texts as understood by the Catholic Church. This present study, however, is necessarily limited to apocryphal writings of the New Testament era.

The Gospel of Judas

This Coptic manuscript forms part of a larger collection

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1. Paul, A. *L'Inspiration*, p.47.
 2. *Ibid.*

of texts discovered in Egypt. The papyrus codex is from the 4th century A.D., approximately 30 cm tall and 15 cm broad, containing gnostic texts. At the time that the codex was discovered, it was probably in good condition, with a leather binding and complete leaves with all four margins intact. But the codex has been badly handled; only half of the leather binding (probably the front cover) is now preserved and the leaves have suffered some breakage. The texts are in a non-standard form of Sahidic. The codex is now known as Codex Tchacos, named after the owner .

The Codex Tchacos contains³ *The Letter of Peter to Philip* (p. 1-9), *The (First) Apocalypse of James* (pp. 10-32) – both texts were also discovered in Nag Hammadi - *The Gospel of Judas* (p.33-58), and then p. 59-66 a previously unknown Gnostic tractate that has been entitled the *Book of Allogenes*. It obviously features the Gnostic messenger whose name is used in the title of a (different) Nag Hammadi tractate [4]. These four texts clearly stem from a Gnostic setting.

The Text

The text of the *Gospel of Judas* in the manuscript is located on pages 33-58. These pages contain the whole text of this apocryphal New Testament writing, even though in fragments because it has been damaged during these last decades. It takes the form of a dialogue, first between Christ and his disciples, and then between Christ and Judas only, during the three days

3. From http://www.tertullian.org/rpearce/manuscripts/gospel_of_judas

preceding the passion.⁴ It deals with discussions and clarifications with the subject, dear to the Gnostics, of the genuine *gnosis* or true knowledge. The text is divided by the editors into three main scenes according to the three days in which the dialogue took place.

SCENE 1: Christ converses with his disciples: The prayer of thanksgiving or the eucharist.

In this scene Christ speaks with the disciples, then chooses Judas as their representative, the one who shows that he has a deeper understanding of Christ.

Christ derides the disciples who break the bread and say the prayer of thanksgiving over it. The disciples said to [him], "Master, why are you laughing at [our] prayer of thanksgiving? We have done what is right". He answered and said to them, "I am not laughing at you. <You> are not doing this because of your own will but because it is through this that your god [will be] praised".

Then Christ introduces the typically gnostic subject of knowledge: He says to them, "How do you know me? Truly [I] say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me". To the exaggerated reaction of the disciples who

4. The text begins with the words: "The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover." The English translation from the coptic Sahidic was done by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, in collaboration with Francois Gaudard. This is the text placed online at the New York Times website.

“became enraged and in their hearts blasphemed him” Christ replied: “Why has this agitation led you to anger? Your god who is within you and [...] [ms p. 35] has provoked you to anger [within] your souls. [Let] any one of you who is [strong enough] among human beings bring out the perfect human and stand before my face”. ... But their spirits did not dare to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot. He was able to stand before him, but he could not look him in the eyes, and he turned his face away.

Christ, knowing that Judas was reflecting upon something that was exalted, said to him: “Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom. It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal. [ms p. 36] For someone else will replace you, in order that the twelve [disciples] may again come to completion with their god”. Christ then disappears from the presence of Judas.

SCENE 2: Christ appears again to the disciples.

The following day, Christ appears again to the disciples and with them discusses the meaning of “great and holy generation”. Then he appears another time to his disciples and they ask him for the explanation of a vision which they had concerning a temple and the worship held in it: “[some] sacrifice their own children, others their wives, in praise [and] humility with each other; some sleep with men; some are involved in [slaughter]; some commit a multitude of sins and deeds of lawlessness. And the men who stand [before] the altar invoke your [name], [ms

p. 39] and in all the deeds of their deficiency, the sacrifices are brought to completion [...]”.

Christ explains the vision saying that it has to do with unworthy priests of the present generation: “Those you have seen receiving the offerings at the altar - that is who you are. That is the god you serve, and you are those twelve men you have seen. The cattle you have seen brought for sacrifice are the many people you lead astray [ms p. 40] before that altar. [...] will stand and make use of my name in this way, and generations of the pious will remain loyal to him. After him another man will stand there from [the fornicators], and another [will] stand there from the slayers of children, and another from those who sleep with men, and those who abstain, and the rest of the people of pollution and lawlessness and error...”.

Christ invites the disciples not to take part in this worship: “Stop sac[rificing ...] which you have [...] over the altar, since they are over your stars and your angels and have already come to their conclusion there. So let them be [ensnared] before you, and let them go...” [about 15 lines missing].

Then Judas asks Jesus about that generation and human generations with these words: “what kind of fruit does this generation produce?”. Christ replies that the good will be rewarded with the resurrection/ascension: “The souls of every human generation will die. When these people, however, have completed the time of the kingdom and the spirit leaves them, their bodies will die but their souls will be alive, and they will be taken up”.

Judas asked Christ what will happen to the remaining generation: “And what will the rest of the human generations do?”. Christ’s answer, concerning their salvation, appears to be negative (the text breaks off at this point): “It is impossible [ms p. 44] to sow seed on [rock] and harvest its fruit. [This] is also the way [...] the [defiled] generation [...] and corruptible Sophia [...]”.

SCENE 3: Judas relates a vision and Christ responds.

In this third scene, which is the heart of the entire text, Judas says to Christ that he has had a vision: “In the vision I saw myself as the twelve disciples were stoning me and [ms p. 45] persecuting [me severely]. And I also came to the place where [...] after you. I saw [a house ...], and my eyes could not [comprehend] its size. Great people were surrounding it, and that house <had> a roof of greenery, and in the middle of the house was [a crowd - two lines missing -], saying, ‘Master, take me in along with these people’”.

Jesus answered and said: “No person of mortal birth is worthy to enter the house you have seen, for that place is reserved for the holy. Neither the sun nor the moon will rule there, nor the day, but the holy will abide there always, in the eternal realm with the holy angels. Look, I have explained to you the mysteries of the kingdom [ms p. 46] and I have taught you about the error of the stars”.

Then Judas asks about his own fate: “Master, could it be that my seed is under the control of the rulers”? Jesus answered

and said: "You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations - and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they will curse your ascent [ms p. 47] to the holy [generation]".

After this Christ teaches Judas about cosmology (dealing with the cosmology of the Gnostics of which we give but one example): "[Come], that I may teach you about [secrets] no person [has] ever seen. For there exists a great and boundless realm, whose extent no generation of angels has seen, [in which] there is [a] great invisible [Spirit], which no eye of an angel has ever seen, no thought of the heart has ever comprehended, and it was never called by any name". These teachings take up pages 47-53.

In pages 55 to 58, which are the final pages of this text, comes the confrontation of the destiny of those who are baptized, and the betrayal by Judas. Judas said to Jesus, "Look, what will those who have been baptized in your name do"? There is no indication of Christ's reply since the manuscript is considerably damaged. Then Christ adds the following words: "But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me. Already your horn has been raised, your wrath has been kindled, your star has shown brightly, and your heart has [...] [ms p. 57]" ... "Look, you have been told everything".

After these words Christ invites Judas to enter a shining cloud with the words: "Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. The star

that leads the way is your star". The scene is much like that of Christ's transfiguration, but the context of the revelation in the shining cloud is typically Gnostic. The apocryphal text continues: "Judas lifted up his eyes and saw the luminous cloud, and he entered it. Those standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud, saying, [ms p. 58] [...] great generation [...] ... image [...] [about five lines missing]". Unfortunately we do not know the words that were uttered from the luminous cloud because the manuscript is damaged.

The last lines of the manuscript present us with the scene of Gethsemane and Christ's arrest: "Their high priests murmured because [he] had gone into the guest room for his prayer. But some scribes were there watching carefully in order to arrest him during the prayer, for they were afraid of the people, since he was regarded by all as a prophet".

Judas has a short conversation with the scribes who want to arrest Christ. They reply: "What are you doing here? You are Jesus' disciple". The text ends with the following words: "Judas answered them as they wished. And he received some money and handed him over to them". The gospel of Judas ends here.

The Characteristics

From the text it can be deduced that the Gospel of Judas was Gnostic. It shows typical Gnostic ideas/practices of secret knowledge, angelology and the influence of the stars on one's life. Ms p.50-51 is a good example.

“The multitude of those immortals is called the cosmos—that is, perdition—by the Father and the seventy-two luminaries who are with the Self-Generated and his seventy two aeons. In him the first human appeared with his incorruptible powers. And the aeon that appeared with his generation, the aeon in whom are the cloud of knowledge and the angel, is called [51] El. [...] aeon [...] after that [...] said, ‘Let twelve angels come into 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.”⁵

Gnosticism is one major characteristic of New Testament apocryphal writings, though there are some non-Gnostic texts as well. As a consequence, one finds *esoteric teachings* as another characteristic, as can be seen from the above text. But of course “esoteric teachings” is a relative term depending on who is using it; and the judgement here is usually of teachings that do not correspond to the faith held by the *megale ekklesia*⁶

5. Text taken from http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/_pdf/GospelofJudas.pdf

6. For definition for this “great Church” see Irenaeus of Lyon *Adversus*

("Great Church" that is often expressed in the teachings of the Fathers of the Church).

Irenaeus of Lyon in c.180 points out these two characteristics, saying that certain Gnostics, apart from certain writings of their invention, also possessed a *Gospel of Judas*, the traitor (*Euaggelion Iouda, Iudae evangelium; Adv. Haer.*, I 31,1-2). The bits of information given by Irenaeus are found in Epiphanius of Salamina (*Panarion* XXXVIII 1,5) and Theodoret of Cyrus (*Haereticorum fabularum compendium* I 15; *Patrologia Graeca* (Migne) 83, 368B). Here is the text of Irenaeus in the translation by Roberts-Donaldson which can be obtained from the internet:⁷

1. "Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons, are related to themselves. On this account, they add, they have been assailed by the Creator, yet no one of them has suffered injury. For Sophia was in the habit of carrying off that which belonged to her from them to herself. They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the

Haereses Book 3 chapter 3.2 in <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.iv.html>

7. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/gospeljudas.html>

Gospel of Judas”.

2. “I have also made a collection of their writings in which they advocate the abolition of the doings of Hystera. Moreover, they call this Hystera the creator of heaven and earth. They also hold, like Carpocrates, that men cannot be saved until they have gone through all kinds of experience. An angel, they maintain, attends them in every one of their sinful and abominable actions, and urges them to venture on audacity and incur pollution. Whatever may be the nature of the action, they declare that they do it in the name of the angel, saying, “O thou angel, I use thy work; O thou power, I accomplish thy operation”! And they maintain that this is “perfect knowledge”, without shrinking to rush into such actions as it is not lawful even to name”.

While it is not absolutely established that the text referred to by Irenaeus corresponds to the text of Codex Tchacos, scholars on both sides of the discussion generally presume this.

The esoterism exhibited by most apocryphal texts involve a secret knowledge that was revealed only to a select few; their practice of the faith can include promiscuity (Nicolaitan Gnostics), snake worship (Ophite Gnostics) and magic (Carpocratian Gnostics).

Another characteristic of apocryphal texts is their *attribution to an apostle or a disciple of the apostle or an early witness to Christ*. The Gospel of Judas is attributed to one of the original 12 apostles of Jesus Christ. This attribution would

therefore claim authority and veracity to the text.

The question of apostolic authority and transmission was proposed by Tertullian in the 3rd century.⁸ Whether attributed indirectly or directly, this characteristic requires the text to claim a tradition that can be traced back to apostolic origins or someone associated with the apostles. This characteristic is widely attested in most of the New Testament apocryphal texts.

With regard to the *Gospel of Judas*, that Judas was one of the apostles is not disputed. It is this point that National Geographic and its supporters take up. However the crux of the matter lies *not* in whether Judas was an apostle but in *how* Judas' apostleship ended: did he fulfill faithfully his apostolic mission as witnessed by the other apostles or was his betrayal of Jesus an abrogation of the apostolic call? Both Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of Matthew contain different records of this end. Acts 1:16-20 uses language that describe Judas as no longer an apostle (1:17) and that his death was prophesied in images of punishment or damnation (1:18) and especially that someone else had to be elected to replace him among the apostles (1:20). Matthew 27:3-5 records Judas as having regretted (metamelomai – to change one's mind or to be sorry) his action (27:3) and declaring his sin to the chief priests and elders (27:4). This would have been a mitigating factor if not for the following line that describes Judas as killing himself – an abomination of shedding blood on the land (Gen. 9:6; Lev. 17:4; Num. 35:33

8. *The Prescription Against the Heretics*, chp 20-22 in <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian11.html>

etc.). The tone is more reconciliatory than in Acts but the suicide is an important factor in deciding if Judas' apostolic call was faithfully held to the end or questionably ended.

The *Gospel of Judas* rests unsteadily on the apostolic origins not because it cannot be traced back to an apostle but rather the nature of the apostleship of Judas is itself held to question.

Other apocryphal gospels however do not share this particular problem. The gospels of Peter, Bartholomew, Thomas, James, Philip, Mary Magdalene, and the like are all attributed to an apostle or first generation disciple. Because they had known Jesus, they would have been privy to some knowledge or event in Jesus' life; thus another characteristic of these texts is the *interest in usually only one aspect of Jesus' life*; e.g. his infancy or his passion or resurrection appearances. The texts are usually elaborations of these singular events. They are rarely as comprehensive as the four canonical gospels' record of the life and works of Jesus. This is the case with the Gospel of Judas: it records only the last 3 days of Jesus' earthly life.

On the otherhand, apostolic origin is not the sole criteria for canonicity. Works such as *The Shepherd of Hermas* and *The Letters of Clement* do not claim apostolic origins yet enjoyed a special status and were found in some codices of the early Church for some time.

Perhaps the most decisive characteristic of apocryphal works is that they are not *consistent with the faith of the Christian community*. What was contrary to the faith traditionally

passed down from apostolic sources and practiced and celebrated by the Christian community, was rejected. It goes against the *sensus fidelium*⁹ of the *megale ekklesia* ("Great Church").¹⁰ It ultimately has to do with a text's authority to guide the faith of the believing community.

Consistency with the Church's faith is succinctly expressed by St. Vincent of Lerins as that which is professed universally, from antiquity and by consent: "by universality, when it is the faith of the whole Church; by antiquity, when it is that which has been held from the earliest times; by consent, when it has been the acknowledged belief of all, or of almost all, whose office and character gave authority to their determinations. This is the famous dictum '*Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab om-*

9. The sum of practice and experience of the Christian faith as lived and taught. *Lumen Gentium* 12 defines it as "The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to His name. The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God. Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life."

10. For definition of this "great, ancient and universally known Church" see Irenaeus of Lyon *Adversus Haereses* Book 3 chapter 3.2 in <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.iv.html>

nibus’,¹¹ While St Vincent’s principle was used in the context of Scripture interpretation, it has been held to be the best expression of the theological understanding of orthodox Christian faith as lived and taught by the Church Fathers.

Because the quantitative measure of “all” is not possible, St. Augustine’s proposal balances this: “Accordingly, among the canonical Scriptures he will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive. Among those, again, which are not received by all, he will prefer such as have the sanction of the greater number and those of greater authority, to such as are held by the smaller number and those of less authority. If, however, he shall find that some books are held by the greater number of churches, and others by the churches of greater authority (though this is not a very likely thing to happen), I think that in such a case the authority on the two sides is to be looked upon as equal.”¹²

In the case of the *Gospel of Judas*, the heroic portrayal of Judas goes against the *sensus fidelium* of the *megale ekklesia*. Faith in fabricated angelologies and demonologies, the hierarchy of aeons and demi-gods (denying the uniqueness of the Triune God), the licentious morality that was taught and practiced; all these provoke a natural revulsion from the *megale ekklesia*

11. “Vincent of Lerins”. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_of_Lerins. Irenaeus of Lyon also expresses this same idea in *Adversus Haereses* Book 3, chapter 3.2

12. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 2, Chapter 8. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12022.htm>

as inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ. This rule of faith is thus one very important factor in determining whether a text is apocryphal or authentic.

A corollary of this characteristic of consistency with the faith of the *megale ekklesia* is the ***use of the text in the faith community's celebration***. A text is judged canonical because it was consistently used in the Church's liturgy; thus conversely a text that was not used consistently in the liturgy was considered apocryphal. The reasoning behind this is that because the text expresses and preserves the faith of the community, so it is read publicly for the community's instruction. Conversely it can be said that by using a text, the Church makes it authoritative. These characteristics complement each other in the dynamics of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. In the case of the *Gospel of Judas*, it is well attested that the *megale ekklesia* had never used it in its liturgy.

This dynamic between orthodoxy and orthopraxis is founded on the belief of ***inspired texts*** which have its origin in the divine revelation of the Triune God. Except for the Cainite Gnostics, the *Gospel of Judas* was never, as far as we know, held to be an inspired text even by other Gnostic sects.

From this comes another characteristic of apocryphal, especially Gnostic, texts: they usually ***divert from the person of Christ and emphasise minor biblical characters***, especially biblical villains to become heroes. The centrality of Christ or the triune God is replaced by such minor figures who take on an importance of their own.

The above is only a general list of characteristics of apocryphal texts related to the New Testament and more have been suggested by scholars. However it does reveal how the early Church conceived the nature of apocryphal texts in contrast to the canonical books. As a conclusion, Augustine of Hippo succinctly describes the contrast between the two in *Contra Faustum* Book XI chapter 5¹³ with the words “there is a distinct boundary line separating all productions subsequent to apostolic times from the authoritative canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The authority of these [latter] books has come down to us from the apostles through the successions of bishops and the extension of the Church, and, from a position of lofty supremacy, claims the submission of every faithful and pious mind” and “In the innumerable books that have been written latterly [i.e. apocryphal books] we may sometimes find the same truth as in Scripture, but there is not the same authority. Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself.”

What is left now is to consider the apocryphal texts that do not fit the above description: Church instructions, liturgical texts and letters, e.g. The Shepherd of Hermas, The Letter of Barnabas, the letters of Clement etc.... Today most scholars no longer classify them as apocryphal but relegate them to a separate category called “Early Church Writings” or “Writings of the Early Church Fathers” since they do not exhibit the general characteristics mentioned above. While being useful to some extent, these texts are not attributed the authority given to the

13. See <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/140611.htm>

canonical books.

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