

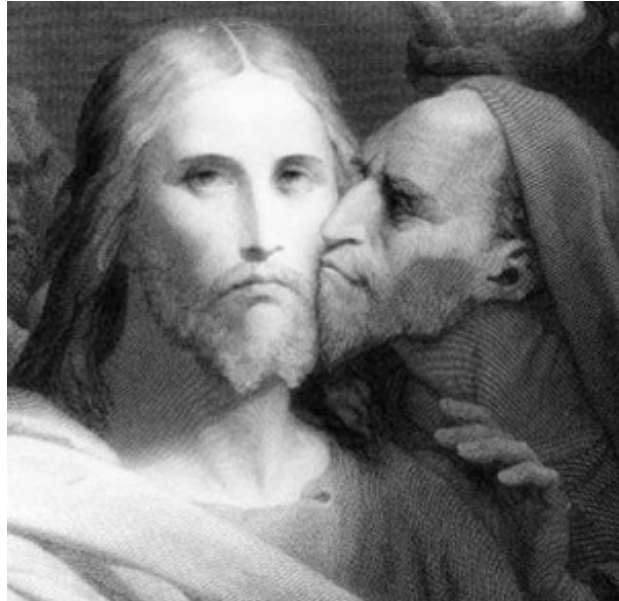
Fact or Fiction – Judas Iscariot

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Introduction

Many, if not most of the books that have been written about Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus Christ, in the last 40 years have taken the position that the traditional view of him is wrong, or at best biased. For example, see the following:

My Name Was Judas, by C.K. Stead

Judas: A Biography, by Susan Gubar

Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus, by William Klassen

In the view of the above authors, and scholars such as Hugh Schonfield (*The Passover Plot*), Aaron Saari (*The Many Deaths of Judas Iscariot*), John Shelby Spong (*The Sins of the Scripture*), and others, Judas is portrayed instead in a mixed or positive light as:

1. A leader or member of the Zealots (a party of Jews who advocated armed rebellion from Rome), who supported Jesus until the latter refused to become king.
2. A friend of Jesus who essentially helped him to do his duty and commit suicide.
3. A negotiator between Jesus and the Jewish authorities.
4. A dupe who didn't fully understand what he was doing.
5. A character invented by the Gospel writers because they supposedly needed a villain — the Greek name “Judas” (“Judah” in Hebrew, the source of the word “Jew”) in this view was purposely employed as an anti-Semitic device.

But is there any tangible support for these views? The only document contradicting what the New Testament says about Judas, and which was written within 100 years of the actual events, is the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas Iscariot*. For centuries this writing was lost to history and only known to have existed because it is referred to as heretical by a number of church leaders such as the Bishop Irenaeus, who mentions it in his work *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies) written around AD 180. Then one partial copy of it was found in Egypt and brought to international attention in 2006; the story of its discovery is told in the book *The Lost Gospel*, by Herb Krosney.

The Gospel of Judas Iscariot

In the *Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, Judas is said to be the hero of the story as well as Jesus' best friend and favorite disciple. He is the person who “enables Jesus to reach the heavens, and he himself is a star in the sky.” Rather than betraying Christ he supposedly helps him, at Jesus own request, to do the dirty work of negotiating with the Jewish authorities so that Jesus can die and “attain eternal life.” In the words of Herb Krosney, “Judas is the one who enables Jesus to fulfill his mission — to die and to release that inner spark within himself and within all of us that is the divine. And that is the concept of this absolutely rare 2nd-century document, which is just coming to light.”

To properly evaluate this we need to understand who wrote the document, and what connection they had, if any, with Jesus and his disciples. The *Gospel of Judas Iscariot* was written by a Gnostic sect of ex-Jews known as the Cainites, who venerated the Biblical character of Cain (the son of Adam who killed his brother Abel), and saw him as a hero. Furthermore, they viewed Jehovah, the God of the Bible, as evil. This group therefore had nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus or his disciples, and much if not all of what they believed was the exact opposite of what Jesus taught (see below for an explanation of how the Cainites came to exist and to hold their beliefs).

There have been hundreds of religious groups throughout history with different ideas about the nature of God — the Cainites are simply one more, with a belief system weirder than most. Their following was small and the group died out within a few years of its formation. The “new light” from this “gospel” is therefore not light at all, and bears no relationship whatsoever to the Biblical Gospels. While this work is historically interesting, it is simply the fantasies of an oddball group that had nothing whatsoever to do with the followers of Christ.

Position of Contemporary Authors and Biblical Evidence

Thus there is no documentary evidence disputing the New Testament view of Judas, but the above authors and scholars generally take the position that the Bible is untrustworthy as a historical and theological work. Therefore it is fair game for recasting in whatever way and shape they desire. Spong, for example, rejects the claim of historical truth for the virgin birth as well as the bodily resurrection of Christ, and consequently was the recipient of the 1999 Humanist of the Year award. He believes that Judas was a fictitious composite of several Old Testament stories. Saari’s take on Judas is that he was an invention of one Christian group contending with others for leadership, and bases his views partly on the fact the Judas is never mentioned in Paul’s epistles (although it is not clear why this omission would allow him to claim that the places where Judas is discussed as a real person are fictitious).

There are, of course, portions of Biblical texts that are disputed and not fully understood. There are also different writing genres employed in various places (history, poetry, prophesy, correspondence, etc.), but it is typically quite clear what genre is being used and how it is to be understood. The NT Gospels are clearly meant to be taken as historical accounts — not classroom tomes of history, but personal statements of what the people of that time experienced, as collected and recorded by the authors. With the possible exception of Luke, none of the gospel authors intended their writing to be what we would consider a “history,” i.e., a comprehensive account of everything that happened in that time. John apparently anticipates this objection and wrote “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” (John 20:30-31)

The Bible in general is extraordinarily accurate in its depiction of events in their historical, geographical, and cultural settings, and so it is with the Gospels. Unlike the Gnostic so-called “gospels,” which were written between 100 and 300 years after the events that they supposedly portrayed, all of the Biblical Gospels were penned by individuals who lived during the time that they wrote about, and who were either eyewitnesses to the events, or had close associations with those who were. A group of people who all see the same event will nevertheless have different perspectives, and may seemingly disagree on some of the minor details. So it is with the gospel accounts.

The gospel authors clearly intended that what they wrote was to be taken literally, as things that they and others had truly seen, heard, and experienced. Luke begins his writing as follows: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it

seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:1-3) Peter wrote: “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” (1 Peter 1:16)

Much has been made in recent years of the supposed power struggles for supremacy among the disciples. The Gospels do not hide the fact that these were very human men with egos and tempers, and who at times had to be rebuked. This is one of the amazing things about the stories of the Bible; most of ancient literature is fairly one-dimensional, casting its characters as either heroes or villains, but even in the OT, the Bible stories are of “real” people, warts and all. King David, for example, is a great leader, but who also had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, and then has her husband killed in an attempt to hide his involvement. The Gospels are the same — Peter is the brash and eager disciple who sometimes puts his foot in his mouth, and who discovers that he is not the courageous hero that he thought he was (e.g., his denial of Christ). The fact that they had a betrayer in their midst is clear to the disciples only in retrospect, which was an embarrassing admission of their lack of insight. Although in their defense, it may also have happened because Judas was initially just as enthusiastic about joining the group as the others, and the eventual betrayal was thus the end result of a long process of personal disillusionment.

But there was nothing like what would be considered to be a true power struggle among the disciples because there was no money, property, or power at stake to struggle for. To be the most prominent among them meant you had to be a servant-leader, not a warrior or a politician. Jesus repeatedly tells Peter “If you love me then you will feed my sheep.” Becoming a follower of Jesus was thus a humbling prospect (and apparently too much for Judas to bear), and many of Jesus’ followers gave up wealth and property in order to follow him. Furthermore, it guaranteed that you would be a target for arrest and persecution, which is exactly what happened in the days of the early church. The only reason that a reasonable and intelligent man would want a position like this is if he was totally convinced of what he believed, and understood that the rewards for his work would primarily be eternal rather than temporal.

The concept of “pope” or “supreme leader” never appears in the NT; rather leadership in the early church was shared (e.g., the appointment of multiple elders and deacons in the book of Acts). The people of that time were painfully aware of how political power worked, and there was a conscious attempt to avoid the one-man/dictator syndrome. Also, the early church was on the run — persecuted by both the Jews and the Romans. It was not until the time of the emperor Constantine, 300 years later, that Christianity was accepted. It was at that point that church leaders, like the Jewish Sanhedrin before them, began to be wealthy and powerful. Constantine’s Edict of Milan, and his declaration of Christianity as a state religion are the true genesis of the papacy and the subsequent power struggles within the church, and with its slide into worldliness.

Judas Iscariot in the Bible

Very little is known about this man, and there are only hints as to his background and mindset. Nothing is said about when, where, or how he became one of the twelve, or what his occupation had been prior to joining the disciples. Furthermore, he is a minor character with little said of him until the story of Jesus reaches its conclusion. The Gospel passages that deal with Judas are as follows: Matthew 10:4, 26:6-25, 26:47-49, 27:3-10; Mark 3:13-19, 14:3-46; Luke 6:12-16, 22:1-53; John 6:66-71, 12:1-8, 13:1-30, 18:1-9.

At the time people were typically named after their father (e.g., “Judas, son of James”), so Judas’ appellation of “Iscariot” is somewhat unusual. His father’s name was Simon, but John 6:71 and 13:26 speaks of “Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot,” so “Iscariot” may have been a family name, as well as a way to distinguish him from other men also named Judas.

The appellation “Iscariot” comes from the Hebrew “Ish-kerioth,” most likely meaning “man of Kerioth.” Kerioth was a small town ten miles south of Hebron, identified today with the ruins of el-Kureitein. It was listed as one of the towns in the territory of Judah (Joshua 15:25), and also possibly referred to in other places (Jeremiah 48:24 & 41, and Amos 2:2) as one of the towns of Moab. There are no natural boundaries or fixed borders in southern Judah, so the Jewish population (descendants of Isaac and Jacob), intermingled with the Edomites/Idumeans (descendants of Esau) and the Moabites (descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew). Judas was therefore most likely either Judean or Idumean. Unlike Judas, most, if not all, of the other disciples were from the Galilee region of Israel.

Galileans were considered to be country bumpkins by the urbane and sophisticated Jews of Jerusalem, and ethnicity may have been a source of tension between Judas and some or all of the other disciples. The Gospels indicate that there was conflict between various disciples on a number of occasions. Some have speculated that “Iscariot” was related to the word “sicaroth” (dagger). They further speculate that Judas was member of the Zealots and possibly one of the “sicarii” (dagger-men), who were a group of Jewish assassins. However, as indicated above, Judas’ father had the same appellation, so if the name had any Zealot connotations, then his father would have to have been involved as well, making the “sicarii” speculation dubious.

As indicated above, we do not know Judas’ age or occupation prior to joining the disciples, although from the Gospels we know: 1) that he was the treasurer of the group; and 2) he was an embezzler. Therefore, this novel’s story of him having a background as a tax collector seems reasonable, as tax collectors at that time were typically greedy and uncaring. Judas may furthermore have been an associate of the tax collector Matthew Levi (the author of the Gospel of Matthew), as in this novel, and this provides a rationale for his being in the Galilee region and thus for his selection and inclusion as one of Christ’s disciples.

In Judas’ outburst during Mary’s anointing of Jesus, he knew the identity and the value of spikenard — how many men can identify the type and price of a perfume by its aroma? That fact could indicate that Judas had worked for a perfumer for some period of time. Most of Jerusalem’s perfumeries were located along southern edge of the city, and a person entering through the southern water gate, where Judas would most likely have entered Jerusalem, would have smelled and eventually seen them.

As indicated above, a few have suggested that Judas was a leader of the Zealots, and a friend of Jesus. He was supposedly trying to protect Jesus, but then turned on his Master when the latter refused to take up the sword against the Romans. But seeing Judas as Jesus' "friend" contradicts Jesus' own statements about Judas, and other evidence we have of his character:

1. "The one who has eaten my bread has lifted up his heel against me." (John 13:18)
2. "I guarded them and not one of them perished except the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled." (John 17:12)
3. "For the Son of Man will go just as it is written of him, but woe to that man by who the Son of Man is betrayed! It would better for him if he had never been born!" (Matthew 26:24 and Mark 14:21)
4. "But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, who was intending to betray him, said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?' Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it." (John 12:4-6)

Even though the gospel writers were silent on many aspects of Judas' life and background, there is abundant and consistent evidence that he was a real historical person. Writers such as Spong above, deny the historicity of Judas not because the evidence is poor, but rather because they do not want to believe in the God of the Bible. Like many other liberal scholars, he has rejected Jehovah, and therefore is driven to challenge and discredit the text in any way he can.

The bottom line is that Judas Iscariot was a real person who betrayed the real Jesus, and then committed suicide because he couldn't live with himself any longer.



Historical Background of the Gnostic Cainite Sect

Why was the *Gospel of Judas* written, and what caused the surge in Gnosticism's appeal during the second century AD and following? It was a reaction on the part of some to the despair and the darkness of those times. Judaism had held the upper hand over Christianity from the standpoint of politics and money, and had persecuted the church since a few years after the death and resurrection of Christ. The Jews as a whole also continued their revolt against Roman power, which led to the Roman general Titus invading Jerusalem in AD 70, and destroying the Jewish temple so thoroughly that there was "not one stone left on top of another." The temple mount that still exists today, on top of which the Dome of the Rock was later constructed, is all that survived.

Further unrest followed, culminating in the Bar Kokba rebellion of AD 132-135. The Jewish leadership had never accepted Jesus as their Messiah because the latter had not been a military ruler, and had refused to be co-opted as a political figure. Seeking for another Messiah, the non-Christian Jews came to regard their military commander, Simon Bar Kokba, whose name meant "son of a star," as their "chosen one." This caused a deep schism between traditional Jews and Jewish Christians. Under Bar Kokba's leadership the Jews surprised the Roman garrisons and wiped them out, and for two years a Jewish kingdom was reestablished in Israel.

But the Roman emperor Hadrian determined to annihilate Jewish resistance to Roman rule once and for all. He had originally been sympathetic to the Jews, and therefore felt personally betrayed, so he crushed this revolt with great ferocity. His armies destroyed every fortification, razed almost every town in the land, and over a half-million Jews were slaughtered. Hadrian had a Roman temple built on the temple mount and dedicated to Jupiter in place of the Jewish temple that had been destroyed by Titus 65 years earlier (it was on the ruins of this structure that the Muslims built the Dome of the Rock 500 years later). To further humiliate the Jews, Hadrian burned a copy of the Torah on the temple mount and eventually had a temple to Jupiter built there, banished all Jews from Jerusalem which he renamed “Aelia Capitolina”, forcibly resettled the survivors in other lands, and renamed the land “Palestine” in place of “Judea” in order to take it off the map and wipe out the existence of the Jews as a people. The word “Palestine” derives from “Philistine,” the sometimes enemies of the ancient Jews, and who lived on the coast-land of Israel in what is now the Gaza Strip. Ironically, the Philistines had ceased to exist as a people since they were conquered by the Babylonians in 604 BC and the survivors forcibly resettled in other areas of Mesopotamia. The identity of the country as Palestine thus dates from Hadrian, the destroyer of Jewish society.

In the bitter aftermath of the Bar Kokba catastrophe, betrayed by their hopes for a Messianic military deliverance, many Jews turned away, sought other religions, and created a number of antinomian and anti-authoritarian sects. The Gnostic Cainites were an example of this — former Jews who came together after the Bar Kokba revolt, and who in embittered cynicism rejected all prior doctrine. The Cainites thus taught that Jehovah of the Old Testament was evil, and they venerated Cain, the first murderer in history. Within a short time the group fell apart and ceased to exist.