

Like Judas, like the Media **The Exploitation of Gospel Facts to Create News Headlines**

The National Geographic Channel is broadcasting twice a week during this month of April a documentary titled “The Gospel of Judas.” The subject of this documentary is widely discussed nowadays in magazines and international newspapers. It questions the historicity of the New Testament and the value of Christian Education as it is imparted by the Church. Conspicuously, the broadcasting timing of this documentary falls in the midst of the Holy Easter festivities, a time during which believers endeavor to strengthen their faith. This documentary however questions the most important Christian beliefs and traditions. Instead of speaking about the person of Jesus Christ as in the cases of Dan Brown’s book and Mel Gibson’s movie, the focus this time is on the person of Judas or what’s called “The Gospel of Judas.” What are the origins of this document? Where was it written, and when? What are its content and its impact on Christians? We will deal with these issues while presenting the most important theories upon which the documentary’s producers based their claims.

The only copy of “The Gospel of Judas” that we know was found in a cave near Al-Minya town in Egypt, in the seventies of the last century. An antique-dealer from Zurich bought it in the year 2000. This manuscript is made of thirty-one pages written in Coptic, an old Egyptian language from the Roman era infused by Ancient Greek. A research team under the direction of Professor Rudolf Kasser, a professor emeritus of Coptic Language from the University of Geneva, worked to restore the deteriorated manuscript and translate it. Few months ago, this team announced the results of their research. They proved through Carbon 14 Test that the manuscript goes back to the second half of the third century A.D. There are a number of old Coptic manuscripts that were lately discovered in Egypt, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, and the Gospel of Truth. These so-called “gospels” belong to the famous Nag Hammadi Library which was discovered in 1945, and published in modern languages starting 1978.

All these newly discovered Coptic documents belong to a Gnostic group living in the Ancient Egypt region. The term “Gnostic” comes from the Greek “gnosis” which means knowledge. The followers of Gnosticism believed in the existence of the main source of good called the Divine Mind. Every person carries in him a spark of this Divine Mind, but the material world obstructs him to recognize this spark. For the Gnostics was not enough to consider the material and bodily world as inferior, a common doctrine in Classical Greek Philosophy, but they also emphasized that this material world is evil and the things related to it such as the body, the marriage and sexual intercourse are also evil, regardless of the cause of their existence whether the cause was a god creator, or the Demiurge, or the devil..

One of the most distinguishing differences between Gnosticism and Christianity is the Gnostic unique view about the origins of evil in the world. Christians believe that God is good, that He made a good world, and that man abused his/her freedom and introduced sin and corruption into the world, and that caused pain and disorder to the natural law.

The Gnostics, however, related the world's evil to a creator god who intently made a corrupted world. Thus, they concluded by this belief that some Old Testament figures are heroes and role models despite their evil life, people such as Cain who killed his brother Abel, and Esau who exchanged his birthright for a dish of red stew. Therefore, the person of Judas and his harming role towards Jesus Christ fits perfectly in the Gnostic system that teaches God's consent to the existence of evil in the world. This explains the Early Church's rejection of these teachings being in total contradiction with the Christian view of man and creation. Any other considerations to explain this rejection is most probably a tendentious fiction of facts.

The Gnostic groups were quite elitist, i.e., not open to the world and only ready to instruct the initiated ones. They considered themselves a chosen and special religious group. This is the main reason why the Gnostic literature remained hidden. We cannot describe the Gnostic documents as if they were "Christian" writings, for Gnosticism is a syncretistic movement. It gathers beliefs from different religions and philosophical schools such as Christianity, Judaism, Roman religions, and Greek Philosophy. The Gospel of Judas comes under this category of these documents and has a great historic value for those who research the Gnostic beliefs. Other than that, these documents do not threaten in any way the Christian faith as held by the Church.

What the documentary says about "The Gospel of Judas" is in complete concordance with the Gnostic beliefs. Judas is the only one who "knows," and he takes directly from Christ the following order that "you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." In fact, this Gnostic text points to Christ as being not a true human being, but as someone who clothes a human body from which he will be freed by Judas' help. Moreover, Judas "knows" that all humanity, excluding the Gnostics who know him and the content of his gospel, will reject him for ages.

St. Irenaeus of Lyon (d. 200 A.D.) mentioned the existence of the Gnostic movement in his book "Against Heresies." He wrote about a sect called the Cainites. In Chapter 31 of his books on heresies, St. Irenaeus mentioned that the Cainites emphasized on the special "knowledge" of Judas, and that the latter accomplished a secret mission when he delivered Christ to the Jewish authorities, and that all this is mentioned in a fictitious history they named "The Gospel of Judas." We, however, cannot accurately affirm that the Gospel of Judas mentioned by Irenaeus is the same as the document we are speaking about, and upon which the aforementioned documentary was based. No one knows the source of this document: was it written in Greek and then translated, or was it written in Coptic?

Is there any historical factuality in the story told in "The Gospel of Judas?" If we review the canonical Gospels we notice a disagreement about the cause that made Judas deliver Christ. Matthew wrote that Judas delivered Christ for money (Matthew 26:14-15), and Mark did not mention any reason. Luke and John confirmed that the devil entered him and pushed him to deliver Christ. (Luke 22:3; John 13:27). In addition we do not find a unified account on the death of Judas. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Judas hung

himself (Mt. 27:5). The Book of Acts, however, mentioned that Judas “purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18). The difference in the accounts is explained by the fact that the New Testament is not as much concerned to show the factuality of its narratives, as to interpret the theological meaning of the narrated facts. Based on the research methods of modern historiography, we are able to conclude that the common factor in all these Gospel stories about Judas emphasizes two essential matters. First, Judas delivered Jesus, and second, Judas hereafter separated from the group of the Twelve. What strengthens the historic validity of these two matters is exactly the differences in the Gospel stories about Judas. These differences corroborate a common witness originating from different traditions and sources, according to the principle of multiple attest used in modern historiography. It is inevitable to mention that the authors of the New Testament present a reading of the historic events from the point of view of the faith, taking into account the whole collection of books, i.e. the canonical whole of the Holy Scripture.

Based on all the above, we can now look at one of the main points discussed in the aforementioned documentary: the accusation that all the hostile acts committed by Christians against the Jewish people throughout history should be caused by what the New Testament, and especially the Gospel of John, teaches. The documentary producers conclude that the Gospel of Judas would make an important change in the way we look at the person of Judas and his role among the disciples (In Hebrew, Judas is derived from the name of the Jews). This kind of analysis is far from the context of the Scriptural texts and is only understood using the literal interpretation of Scripture. Should we follow this kind of interpretation on some Old Testament passages, we would find that the Old Testament would teach hatred against all non-Jewish nations, and that it would validate killing in order to overtake the Land, having the right and the power of the Divine Justice. Therefore, we cannot read the Holy Scripture other than in its canonical context defined but the tradition of the Church and through interpretive means based on reason and critical spirit. The New Testament does not allow having any position of hatred against any person, and does not teach racism or discrimination. Thus, as a summary to the way used by Jesus to interpret the Holy Scriptures, it is sufficient to quote this passage from the Gospel of Matthew:

But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Mt. 22:34-40)

In this passage, Jesus teaches that the relationship between man and God and the neighbor is firstly based on love as defined in the books of the law and the prophets.

There is no doubt that the picture of Jesus given in the Gospel of Judas about is totally different than that of the four canonical Gospels. Nevertheless, the documentary describes the content of the Gospel of Judas as “authentic.” The adjective “authentic” is repeated throughout the documentary in different places and having different meanings. What does it mean that the manuscript is authentic? Does this claim that the author was Judas Iscariot? Or that the story of Judas about Jesus is genuine? Or simply, that the manuscript contains authentic Gnostic writing dating back to the third or fourth century? The specialists know that the degree of authenticity that may be given to this manuscript is strictly related to its contents which agree with the Gnostic doctrines, and not to the authenticity of the author or to the truthfulness of its story concerning Jesus.

It is no doubt that the research about the Gospel of Judas will contribute to the understanding of the religious and philosophical movements inside the Roman Empire after the spread of Christianity. In contrast, this manuscript will not benefit us if we want to learn more about the person of the historic Judas, for it does not refer to credible historic facts. Also, it does not at all influence the essence of the Christian faith as the advertisement of the documentary claims.

The continuous suggestion of the documentary’s producers about the theory of the Church’s plot to unveil some of the personal facts related to Jesus and His disciples, whose initiator should have been St. Irenaeus, has no scientific or historic foundations at all; even though this theory is very appealing to book and magazine publishing companies, and to film producers. In fact, anyone can get a copy of these Gnostic gospels from any specialized bookstore.

The theories of conspiracy resulted in greater increase in profits in the nineties of last century, when those responsible of the international advertisement companies insisted to unveil the “secrets” of Qumran Manuscripts, i.e., the Manuscripts of the Red Sea. As for Dan Brown’s book about the “secrets” of Jesus and the Church, it resulted in a great and unprecedented business boom in the market. It is not a coincidence that the date chosen to unveil the text of “The Gospel of Judas” comes during Christian Easter time, and just before the worldwide release dates of the “Da Vinci Code” film in May 19. This marketing strategy makes people fall in the trap of collective consumerism, bringing enormous profits to media companies, even if it is on the expense of the Gospel and the Christian Faith.

These theories about Judas are not new. In modern times, new depictions of Judas appeared in arts and literature, taking away his role of traitor. For example, in the 1973 musical play “Jesus Christ Superstar” a black man takes on the role of Judas. He says upon delivering Jesus, “Truly I did not come here on my own will” to signify that he did not want to deliver him. In addition, we bring up the story of Nikos Kazantzakis, the “Last Temptation of Christ” (1951), which was directed by Martin Scorsese in 1988. In these two works, Judas plays the role of the Christ’s conscience, asking Him to fulfill his messianic mission that is to organize a public revolt in Jerusalem. In this context, we remember also the story of Taylor Caldwell titled “I, Judas” published in 1977.

Since a long time, the accusations against the Holy Scripture became numerous. Also, since the end of the last century, the texts doubting the person of Jesus Christ multiplied. The Holy Scripture however will remain immutable against all these challenges, for its message is consistent, logically harmonious with all its components, and its first aim is to proclaim the love of God and His deeds for man through Jesus Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Whoever studies in a scientific way the Holy Scripture knows very well that it is impossible to consider it as an inauthentic or a misleading book, but it is a genuine book, addressing all human beings, and calling them to contemplate the good deeds made by God in man and in all creation.

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