

An Inquiry into the Reliability of the Gnostic Gospel of Judas and the Canonicity of the Bible

Introduction

The widely watched and popular National Geographic released recently the gospel of Judas, a gnostic gospel account discovered in the 1970s in a tomb by the Nile river in Egypt (see Strait times, Life Section, dated 8 and 20 April 2006, pages 2 and 10). Though it has degenerated into fragments, scholars and coptologists reconstructed and translated it from the original Coptic into English. Believed to be written about 180 AD or later, the copy discovered actually dated around AD 300. Liberal Bible scholars were interviewed and they lend credence to this discovery claiming that it purportedly shed new light on the life and death of Christ and his relationship with his disciple Judas Iscariot. In this new found gospel, Judas gained unusual prominence not as the villain as portrayed in the canonical gospels but the favoured disciple of Christ and enjoyed secret knowledge and a special relationship with Christ who apparently "helped" the latter to escape this mortal world through death. The world was abuzz with interest in this theme with both positive and negative responses on the matter.

The discovery of this book shook up the secular and Christian world and many books have been written, including **"The Gospel of Judas"** edited by Kasser, Marvin and Wurst who presented Judas in a favourable light, a novel twist to the authentic and accepted gospel accounts. We shall consider and examine this esoteric claim in the light of the Scriptures and the evidence that can be adduced to shed light on the proper response to the Judas gospel to see if it is a trustworthy account at all.

The Origin of the Gospel of Judas

The Gospel of Judas begins with these words: "the secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before the celebrated Passover." Later, the text says that Jesus tells Judas, "You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothed me." (*The Gospel of Judas*, Published by the National Geographic Society, 2006).

Dr Albert Mohler quoted Metropolitan Bishop, leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who considered *The Gospel of Judas* as "non-Christian babbling resulting from a group of people trying to create a false 'amalgam' between the Greek mythology and Far East religions with Christianity . . . They were written by a group of people who were aliens to the main Christian stream of the early Christianity. These texts are neither reliable nor accurate Christian texts, as they are historically and logically alien to the main Christian thinking and philosophy of the early and present Christians."

The Gospel of Judas was discovered in the 1970s in an Egyptian cave. Until recently, no institutions were willing to pay the exorbitant fee to get the manuscript due to its dubious origin. A foundation in Switzerland eventually purchased the codex to release its content. In 2006, the National Geographic Society announced that the manuscript has been authenticated by carbon dating, studied and translated by a group of biblical scholars they assembled. However, it is noteworthy that up to one-third of the gospel according to Judas is either missing or illegible and this gnostic Gospel is likely dated back to 2nd -4th century AD, many years after the death of Judas Iscariot.

"The Judas" was historically known as the Cainites. The peculiar teachings of this sect included the rehabilitation of many characters presented negatively in the Bible, starting with Cain. In essence, the Cainites attempted to take the negative figures of the Bible and present them in a heroic light. In order to do this, of course, they had to create alternative texts and an alternative rendering of the story of Jesus.

In 2004, Dan Brown in his notorious book that sold more than 40 million copies worldwide, *the Da Vinci Code* cited two passages from two different Gnostic "Gospels" (ie Thomas and Philip) that implied some special relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene and **traded fiction for fact and subtly misled many into believing that these gnostic gospels were on par with canonical Scriptures.**

Gospel of Judas – its Authorship and Content

The authorship of the gospel of Judas is still a mystery. It is unknown who wrote the Gospel of Judas. Irenaeus, a celebrated polemicist of the second century and a disciple of Polycarp, a direct disciple of the Apostle John is referred to the Gospel of Judas as **invented history of heretics and rebels**. In about 180 AD, Irenaeus wrote:

"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 Gospel of Judas.**" (*Adversus Haereses* I.31.1; Roberts-Donaldson translation).

Eusebius the Church father, called them "totally liberal and impious". The Gospel of Judas is properly considered to be **a Gnostic gospel and is consistent with Gnostic viewpoints**. The Gnostics believed that the road to salvation was through secret knowledge given by Jesus to his inner circle. The text concocted the amazing theory that Jesus wanted Judas to betray Him in order to fulfil Jesus' plan for himself. Hence Judas is seen here as an innocent and obedient disciple set up by heaven and has done a great honour in betraying Christ instead. This

is totally unfounded and is a fanciful tale to **titillate and seduce many to believe a lie to say the least or a gross diabolical distortion of biblical truth calculated to undermine the veracity of the biblical record.** This Gnostic gospel is contrary to the accepted gospel accounts of the New Testament, which rightly presents Judas as a condemned traitor as our Lord has stated clearly in Luke 17:1 and Mark 14:21.

Assuming if it was Jesus' plan for Judas to betray Him, why would Jesus call Judas the son of perdition in John 17:12? Jesus also stated that it would have been better if Judas had never been born. Mark 14:21 records. *For I, the Son of Man, must die, as the Scriptures declared long ago. But woe to the man where the Son of man be betrayed. Good were it for the man if he had never been born!* We have two contradictory statements here between the actual words of Christ as recorded in the canonical gospels vis a vis the unreliable and dubious words as recorded in the unverified Gnostic Gospel of Judas. **Who would you believe: the immutable and divine words of the Son of God or the questionable account of the son of perdition?**

It has to be stated here that there are substantive differences between the two accounts concerning the character and picture of Judas. The Bible reports that Judas was a guilty and unrepentant traitor who was under the influence of Satan and betrayed our Lord for monetary gain and finally committed suicide (Matt 27:3-7) after he received his bribe or monetary reward for betraying Christ. (It was recorded that Satan entered into him before he betrayed our Lord, Luke 22:3). Why would Judas do this if he was following Jesus' instructions as claimed in the Gnostic gospel of Judas? This is enigmatic and perplexing and a serious problem for those who choose to believe the Gospel of Judas, for it is recorded that Judas threw the money onto the floor of the Temple and later went out and hanged himself.

Gnosticism Exposed

The Gospel of Judas is considered "Gnostic" in origin. What is Gnosticism? Generally, Gnostics (which means knowledge in Greek) hold that salvation of the soul comes from a quasi-intuitive knowledge of the mysteries of the universe and of secret formulae indicative of that knowledge. The gospel according to Judas is simply **a heretical record of a marginalised Christian cult or clandestine Jewish mysticism including others like the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Philip.**

Gnosticism is also a loose term for groups who saw Christianity as consisting of hidden wisdom and tended to be hostile to the physical world and to define salvation as freedom from the body and ascension to a spiritual reality. They also were generally hostile to the Old Testament and saw the Creator of the physical

world as a different being from God the Father. In short, it was a heretical and cultic belief of the 1st-4th century, which is unanimously rejected by the early Church and have been revived in the 1970s in the new age movement misleading many into a kind of esoteric spiritism and an interest in the supernatural without the saving power of the living and true God (2 Tim 3:5-9).

Concerning the Crucifixion, some "Gnostics" thought that the divine "Christ" indwelt the human being Jesus beginning with his baptism and abandoned him after the crucifixion. Others thought that Jesus didn't really suffer at all but only in appearance as a phantom or ghost. The "Gospel of Judas" sacrilegiously implied that the betrayal of Christ by Judas was a "good thing" for Christ because it liberated the inner Christ from the physical constitution. Gnostics were generally not well-organised and were often part of orthodox Christian congregations, seeing themselves as secret, esoteric spiritual elite. That's one of the reasons that early century defenders of orthodoxy were opposed to them (ie like Irenaeus).

We now have over 25,000 extant ancient texts (especially significant is the providentially preserved Received Text which underscore the faithful and reliable KJV) and fragments confirming the legitimate biblical accounts. But we have only found one dubious copy of the Gospel of Judas lying in an ancient trash heap in the back of a solitary cave. Just as Judas betrayed Jesus Christ, **this strange gospel, (which is another gospel in Gal 1:6,7) has betrayed itself by its questionable origins and the denial of the truths concerning the death of the Son of God.**

It is also noteworthy that all the four of the Canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) tell the complete story of Jesus' ministry in a chronological format, from His (birth for Matt and Luke), baptism, to His works and deeds preaching the Good News, to His Passion and Crucifixion, ending with the Resurrection and the ascension and there is an intrinsic and organic harmony among them (Matt 26, Mark 14, Luke 23 and John 19). This was not so of the Gospel of Judas, Thomas, Philip and Mary Magdalene which are at variance with canonical gospels accepted by the Church and the early Church fathers. The four canonical gospels reflect diversity in essential unity and they all share one key element consistently: namely **the authentic and coherent account of the life of Jesus**; his suffering and his death for his people and his subsequent resurrection and ascension to heaven (Matt 28:1-20). There is no contradiction in the entire Bible on the accounts of the life of Christ and **there is a remarkable and amazing harmony and unity is seen in all the canonical 66 books of the holy Bible.**

It is instructive to note that each of the four canonical Gospels was written for a specific community to emphasise certain parts of Jesus ministry that were particularly important. Matthew, for example, was written for the early Jewish Christian community and spends a great deal of time emphasising Jesus' role as

the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies of the Messiah, and his fulfillment of the ancient law. Luke, by contrast, was written for the community of Gentile (mostly Greek) Christians, and spends a great deal of time emphasising the universality of Jesus' message to the Gentiles (a theme further developed in the "sequel" to Luke's Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles).

None of the canonical gospels reflect or endorse Gnosticism or Gnostic teachings, which was considered heretical by those inspired authors (like John) who were ordained of God to put the Gospels and the epistles together in the NT (2 Tim 3:16,17, 2 Pet 1:20,21, 1 John 4:1-4, 2 John 9-11).

The Origins of the Canon of the Bible

The word "canon" appears in the Greek New Testament about five times (2 Cor 10:13, 15-16; Gal 6:16; Phil 3:16) and its meaning has been applied to the inspired body of Scripture; namely the providentially preserved and inerrant Bible. Frequently, the word "canon" is translated as "rule" and refers to God's rules by which men are supposed to live righteously before God and certainly the rules by which men will ultimately be judged by.

The question is asked, **"Which books belong to the Old Testament?"** It is important to understand that the Old Testament has never been doubted by the Jews. The Old Testament claim for themselves divine inspiration (eg "Thus saith the Lord"). **The prophets quoted one another and recognised each other as inspired of God** (Mic 4:1-4; Isa 2:2-4; Dan 9:2). Joshua received Moses' teachings as the Word of God and some of the writing prophets are even listed in the Bible (1 Chron 29:29). Jesus indirectly gave us the Old Testament canon when he referred to it in Luke 24:44). Anyone who accepts the authority of Jesus will accept what He acknowledged as Scripture.

Our Lord pointed people to John 5:35-39 where he attested to the truthfulness and authenticity of Scripture. Jesus recognised three major divisions of the OT, which included the 39 books (Luke 24:44), namely The Law (Torah), ie the five books of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy). **The Prophets (Nebhiim)**, ie "the former prophets" (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and "the latter prophets" (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and a book containing the 12 minor prophets). **The Writings (Kethubhim)**, ie three poetical (Psalms, Proverbs and Job), five rolls (the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, and Ecclesiastes) and several historical (Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles). It is noteworthy that Jesus followed the arrangement of the Old Testament books that was customary among the Jews and we see this from His comments in Luke 11:49-51. There he speaks of the persecution of the prophets from the murder of Abel (Gen 4:8) to the slaying of Zechariah (2 Chron 24:20,21). This arrangement is the one that is followed in the Hebrew Old Testament today also although Jesus does not quote from every book of the Old Testament but he does quote

from all three of the main divisions, showing that he accepted the entire Old Testament as canonical.

The Old Testament canon was also recognised by the Apostles. Paul acknowledged the Hebrew canon as written for our learning (Rom 15:4) and for our admonition (1 Cor 10:11) and that it is profitable for doctrine (2 Tim 3:14-17). The Apostles frequently quoted from those books in the Hebrew canon in their gospels (eg Matt 1:22-23; 2:17-18; John 12:37-41) in their efforts to evangelise (eg Act 17:2-3) and in their epistles (eg Rom 3:9-10; 4:3; 1 Pet 2:6).

Historically, the Old Testament books can be traced back to the time in which they were written and in which the writers lived from about 3200-400 BC. **The Old Testament books agree totally with all known facts characteristic of the time of their writing and has no mistakes at all concerning historical information or geography or any other subject.** The Jewish people, the long time custodians of God's Word, always believed that **the Old Testament is the veritable Word of God and never doubted it.** The verbal inspiration and preservation of the Old Testament canon was never in doubt by God's people.

Confirmation of the Old Testament is also abundantly found in the New Testament. All the Old Testament books are said to be quoted in the New Testament except Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. This does not undermine or minimise their canonicity or inspiration but that these books may have only lacked opportunity for abundant use in the New Testament.

It is also noteworthy that The New Testament claims that the Old Testament is inspired (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21). The early Church, first under the direction of inspired Apostles, recognised the Old Testament as inspired and true (Acts 13:16-41).

Secondly, **which books belong to the New Testament?** The vast majority of New Testament books were never doubted by God's people. The determining factor of whether a book belonged in the Bible rested with the intrinsic integrity and veracity of the book by inspired authors, approved and sanctioned by God (2 Pet 1:20-21). The Church did not technically officiate a list of the inspired canon but merely accepted God-given inspired books as canonical. **The canon was officially recognised by the Church at the Council of Carthage of 397 AD.** Hailed as a historic occasion; they merely affirmed what is already the Scriptures approved by God, the Apostles and his Church two centuries before. The absolute divine merit and infallible content of the 27 New Testament books themselves determined the New Testament canon and the Apostles also lend credence to them (2 Pet 3:16).

There is **sufficient proof, testimony and evidence of the validity and authenticity of the New Testament.** The books themselves claim inspiration.

The New Testament writers believed their writings to be inspired Scripture and commanded Christians to circulate them as such (1 Thes 5:27; Col 4:16; Rev 1:3). The Apostle Peter recognised the Apostle Paul's writings (ie the Epistles) as on par with Old Testament Scripture (2 Pet 3:16). Warnings appear in the New Testament concerning deviation from or corruption of the New Testament, which attests its divine nature (Gal 1:6-9; Rev 22:18-19) and is consistent with the teachings of the Old Testament.

The basis of the New Testament is fulfilment of the Old Testament, chiefly the authenticated resurrection of Jesus Christ, which the New Testament affirms. The New and Old Testament is historically correct in all of its facts on history, (ie concerning the Roman Empire and its proconsuls) and science * (ie the earth is round (Isa 40:22), life is in the blood (Lev 17:11), 2nd law of Thermodynamics (Ps 102:24-26) and geography (ie the topography of the land of Israel) and any other themes it touches on The New Testament was **accepted as Scripture from the time it was first written**, at least initially by those to whom **various parts of it were addressed** (1 Thes 2:13). Later in the centuries, many Church fathers like **Ireaneus verified the validity and authenticity of these New Testament books.**

The New Testament was well recognised by the people of God and one of the criteria was that there are written by an Apostle and it is consistent with other Scriptures that are already accepted as part of the canon. Questions like "Is it accepted by the Church fathers and the Christian community at large"? Are there any discrepancy in the content of this book with other books that are already recognised is appropriately asked. **All the 27 books of the New Testament passed all this stringent criteria with flying colours and is absolutely indestructible and totally reliable as the veritable, unchanging, providentially preserved Word of God today.**

The Apocryphal books

The question is often asked which ancient books do not belong in the Bible? Firstly, it is important to note there is a vast amount of literature that never claimed nor was thought to be biblical (eg secular, legal documents, histories of the state). Additionally, the Apocrypha which are 14 extra-canonical books written during the inter-testamental period does not properly belong in the Bible. **None of them are ever quoted or referred to by Christ or the inspired authors of the biblical books.**

The apocryphal books were written in the 400-odd year period between the two testaments when admittedly there were no prophets of God. Some apocryphal do not claim to be inspired. The oldest catalogue of canonical books of the Old Testament does not include the apocryphal books. **The apocryphal were never accepted by the Jewish community as inspired and it contains questionable teachings** (ie prayers for the dead, purgatory etc) that are often in

conflict with the inspired books accepted already as Scripture by the established Church.

It is evident that **Jesus and His Apostles accepted the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures which include the 39 books in the Old Testament (and later the 27 books of the NT by the Church) and not the gnostic gospels nor the extra biblical apocryphal books.**

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul warned in Gal 1:6-8, *I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto **another gospel**: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would **pervert the gospel of Christ**. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach **any other gospel** unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. We are soberly admonished by the Apostle John and Paul to test the spirits (behind these books) in the last days (1 John 4:1-4, 1 Thes 5:21).*

The last days as predicted by our Lord in the New Testament (Matt 24:1-5) will be **days of great declension, spiritual deception, strange theory gospels and novel claims** will often be made that are contrary to true religion in the undermining the Word of God with these malevolent assaults or false allegations. The sufficiency and canonicity of the Scriptures are important tenets of our Christian faith. Unfortunately, this worldwide release of the Gospel of Judas was done just before the Passion week recently for maximum mileage among the redeemed of God and unredeemed world and the gnostic gospel appeared to have the support of the liberal scholars. Paul in 1 Tim 6:20 says, *O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called.*

The regenerate community is to be spiritually enlightened and admonished and be vigilant lest the evil one caught us unaware and seduce some with their diabolical lies and falsehood distorting the correct view concerning the Bible.

The true disciples and Churches of Christ today have a grave responsibility to preach the pure gospel account of Christ, warn others and continue steadfast to defend the faith once delivered to the saints in the final moments of human history before Our Lord returns soon. We have absolute confidence in the veritable, sufficient, canonical and preserved Word of God which is the more sure Word (2 Pet 1:19-21) in our hands today. We believe in the sufficiency and completion of the whole canon for the bible by AD100 as the apostle John in Rev 22:18-20 says, *For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this*

book. He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

Dr Jack Sin

Maranatha BPC Church ,Singapore,

www.maranatha-bpc.com

(For further studies on this subject of canonicity of the Bible, read *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*; 788-824, Robert Raymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian faith*, 25-88, Norman Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, 199-201).