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Judas -- Traitor or Hero?

The third episode of the CNN special, Finding Jesus: Fact, Faith and Forgery, focuses on the role of Judas among the twelve disciples, featuring the second-century Gospel of Judas. Translated from the Coptic in 2006, this recently discovered Gnostic gospel potentially sheds new light on the role of Judas among the disciples in ways that could inform our understanding of Jesus’ ministry and how it was perceived in early Christianity. This episode raises the question centrally as to whether Judas was really a traitor, as portrayed in all four canonical Gospels, or whether he might better be seen as a hero. After all, if Jesus intended to die, perhaps Judas was an accomplice rather than a villain.

The episode develops first the presentation of Judas in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. These, of course, are produced a century or so before the Gospel of Judas and provide the earliest written memories of Judas and his actions. As such, focusing on Judas is a worthy subject of historical interest; like the role of John the Baptist, Judas and his actions are unlikely to have been invented. According to the Gospels, Judas exposed Jesus to the religious authorities with an ironic kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane for thirty pieces of silver. On one hand, the gesture is innocent enough; the recompense for a slave who is gored by an ox is thirty silver shekels (Exodus 21:32); on the other hand, this amount offered to Zechariah is perceived as an underpaid insult in exchange for his services as a shepherd of Israel, leading him throw the money down in the temple treasury (Zechariah 11:12-13). Judas does something similar in Matthew 27:5 before going out and hanging himself in regret for his deed. As Erwin McManus puts it, the tragic demise of Judas at the end of the day reflects "not the story of God's giving up on Judas, but Judas' giving up on himself."

While Judas Iscariot is uniformly presented as a traitor in all four canonical Gospels, though, the question raised by this episode, as described by David Gibson, is not "Who done it?" but "Why done it?" Answers to this question include such possibilities as: Judas was in it for the money (after all, he held the money bag according to John 13:29). Or, perhaps Judas sought to tip the hand of Jesus -- hoping to precipitate a divinely empowered defeat of the Romans. Then again, if the betrayal of Jesus was part of a divine plan, perhaps it was simply a fulfillment of scripture (Acts 1:16). One thing this episode does not develop satisfactorily, in my view, is the implications of Judas' being the only disciple from the south -- Kerioth -- perhaps implying sedition from the south, betraying the northern prophet from Galilee to the Judean authorities. The second-century pseudepigraphal Gospel of Judas, however, presents Judas in a more favorable light. Perhaps he was simply misunderstood. Either way, might a fuller understanding of Judas pose an assist in the larger interest of finding Jesus? Not a bad question.

Of course, the general content of the Gospel of Judas is not unknown in church history; Bishop Irenaeus (around 180 CE) describes it as a fictitious narrative styled after Judas -- a Gnostic text purporting heretical views (Against Heresies 1.31.1). The group associated with
this text called "Cainites" identified with the villains of Hebrew and Christian scriptures while also claiming to have received enlightened knowledge from Sophia and intermediary angels between heaven and earth. As the CNN episode develops further, the Gospel of Judas also portrays the disciples of Jesus as noncomprehending simpletons, and visions of heinous acts reflect this Gnostic sect's adversarial stance against institutional Christianity. While Elaine Pagels' explanation that second-century Gnosticism reflects an adverse reaction against institutional Christianity in the mid-to-late second century CE, this does not imply the group's virtue, let alone say anything about the historicity of its claims. The film could have made these points more clearly.

In short, the Gospel of Judas offers us absolutely nothing historical about the Jesus of history, or even the Judas of history. The same is true for other second- and third-century apocryphal writings claiming the names of apostles falsely, although the Gospel of Thomas includes some sayings rooted in Jesus-tradition alongside later, clearly Gnostic teachings. Therefore, one wonders what value there could be in focusing on a second-century Gnostic text, seeing Judas either as a thirteenth fallen angel (as April DeConick argues), or a thirteenth aeon or kingdom (as Marvin Meyer argues) contributes to the historical quest for Jesus of Nazareth. What the Gospel of Judas does convey is some of the speculation within second-century Gentile Christianity, deemed as heretical by the mainstream church.

That being the case, the question is left hanging as to whether Judas was primarily a traitor or a hero. Perhaps he was a bit of both. Clearly, his primary association among the canonical Gospels is that of being a traitor, although the "handing over" of Jesus to the authorities is not necessarily to be rendered as a "betrayal" in the Greek. And, it could be that the intentions of Judas were more positive than the Gospel accounts convey. What is clear, from the Gospel writers' perspectives, is that God also used the betrayal from among Jesus' band of closest followers to accomplish the saving-revealing work of Christ on the cross. And, once more, the strongest historical evidence along these lines emerges from the canonical Gospels themselves, rather than later, apocryphal texts. On that score, this episode seeks to make sense of the canonical narratives rather than trying to improve upon them, and such is a worthy place to begin.

Therefore, the central point of the Judas element within the larger story of Jesus might not be irony but paradox. Indeed, it is ironic that one of Jesus' closest followers should betray him with a kiss. And, the taking of blood money ironically led to Judas' taking his own life, in bitter remorse. Paradoxically, though, the murder of an innocent man, whether intended by humans for ill or for good, is used by God to bring about the redemption of the world. As Martin Luther King, Jr. has reminded us, undeserved suffering is always redemptive. In the undeserved death of Jesus, even as facilitated by Judas, the Romans were not destroyed, but the threat of death itself is overcome. Thus, whether or not Judas is to be envisioned as a traitor or a hero, a larger story is here involved, and that brings us back to the central interest at hand: finding Jesus, the heart of the story.