

# The Patron Saint of Traitors

by [Jeff Plude](#) (April 2021)



*Judas*, Edward Okun, 1901

The Gospel according to Matthew tells us that the chief priests of Israel wanted to kill Jesus, who said he was the son of God and had set about proving it, but they were afraid of the people. They needed an accomplice, an insider, to tip them off when Jesus and his inner circle were alone, at night, when he could be arrested, seized, and detained without the supposed blasphemer's enthusiastic followers being able to defend him or attack his accusers.

Enter Judas Iscariot, the most odious name in all of history. At least for Christians, he is.

Judas went to the chief priests and offered his services, for which he received thirty pieces of silver (Mark leaves the actual amount out of his gospel, but Matthew was a former tax collector, after all). John MacArthur, a longtime pastor and prominent Christian apologist, says the amount was the price of a slave at the time, but even if it were thirty million pieces of silver the price was too high—Judas's soul. And Judas did have a soul.

As if that weren't enough there was the sign to point out the culprit to the armed band of captors that Judas led out to the secluded place where Jesus and his apostles often went, the garden of Gethsemane. "Dost thou betrayest me with a kiss?" Jesus asks Judas, according to Luke's gospel, perhaps the most understated irony of all time. That kiss says more than words could ever say about Judas. Which is why it has become indelibly imprinted on the collective imagination, from Giotto's iconic painting of it to a lyric in the band U2's "In the Name of Love."

You can't get more treacherous than Judas. Judas is the patron saint of traitors, the chief of traitors. Which is why his very name, Judas, used to be a universal synonym for a traitor. He is the greatest—or rather the worst—of all traitors.

It's incredible to think of it all, to put yourself in Judas's sandals for a moment. God has chosen the nation of Israel as the group of people through whom he will reveal his plan of salvation for humanity. That plan is to send the Messiah, God's son, to deliver Israel. But Israel backslides, so God offers that salvation to the rest of the world—the gentiles—as well. The son of God is born and grows into a man and is finally ready, at the age of thirty, to start his ministry. He picks twelve apprentices, or apostles, who will carry on the work of spreading the gospel after he is crucified and resurrected and ascends into heaven. Being among those twelve is the greatest honor ever bestowed on a person

other than Jesus himself. One of this exalted group is Judas Iscariot. And not only that, he is key to setting the mighty wheels of salvation and redemption into historic motion.

Yet there appears to be a conundrum. According to Matthew's account of the last supper, Jesus not only identifies Judas as his betrayer but pronounces a devastating verdict:

*The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born.*

But that begs the question: if Judas had not been born, he wouldn't have been there to betray Jesus, and if Jesus had not been betrayed he may not have been crucified, and if Jesus had not been crucified there would have been no resurrection, and without Jesus's resurrection there would be no eternal life. There would be no salvation, which was accomplished by Jesus, being both God and man, atoning for the sins of all humanity by dying in their place on the cross.

Therefore Judas is doing holy work by betraying Jesus, the apology for him goes. Some go even further than that, a lot further: Judas is even more holy than the other eleven apostles! who, it is claimed, are supposedly rather slow of understanding by comparison. The most recent example of this iconoclastic view was put forth in the so-called Gospel of Judas, a purported manuscript of which was apparently discovered around 1970 in Middle Egypt. Twenty years ago it made its way to the National Geographic Society, which published it in 2006.

Almost from the beginning of the Christian church the Gnostics, who come in many variants, have been trying to pervert the true gospel message as it is revealed in the New Testament. Many apocryphal gospels and epistles began to pop up. One of them, apparently, was a Gospel of Judas. The only

way we know about it at all is through the writing of one of the early church fathers, Irenaeus, who mentions it in his *Adversus Haereses*, or *Against Heresies*, published some time in the second century. He calls out the Gnostics for their glorification of Judas:

*They declare that Judas the traitor ... 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.*

This supposedly misunderstood Judas, however, remained mostly in the shadows down through the centuries, since Christianity held sway in the West after the fall of the Roman Empire. It wasn't until the modern era that he was ready to be resurrected and hailed as an antihero. Jorge Luis Borges's "Three Versions of Judas" was published in 1945, which coincidentally is the same year the Dag Hammadi library of Gnostic writings was discovered in Egypt. But a century before that Thomas De Quincey wrote a long essay in defense of Judas, which Borges cites in a footnote in his short story.

Borges calls "Three Versions" a short story, but it reads more like an essay, and a twisted one at that. It's an account of an imagined early twentieth-century religious scholar named Nils Runeberg (Swedish, interestingly, like another prominent occultist pseudo-Christian, Emanuel Swedenborg). Borges writes that if Runeberg had been born in the second century he would've headed "with singular intellectual passion one of the Gnostic conventicles." Borges's alter ego has written two books, *Christ and Judas* and *The Secret Savior*. According to Runeberg, Judas "renounced honor, morality, peace and the kingdom of heaven, just as others, less heroically, renounce pleasure." And if that wasn't enough: "He acted with enormous humility, he believed himself unworthy of being good."

But now we have the actual words of the Gospel of Judas.

There are a few problems, however. The entire text is not quite 3,000 words, compared with, say, the Gospel according to John, which is upwards of 20,000 words. National Geographic's book that contains the Gospel of Judas explains that the papyrus codex with the manuscript, estimated by carbon dating to have been written between the third and fourth centuries, had broken into many tiny pieces over the years and was in bad shape. Four experts were hired to put it back together and translate the Coptic text.

It was a big job, and apparently a job badly done. At least one biblical scholar has severely criticized the work. April D. Connick writes in an [op-ed](#) in the *New York Times* that there are several choices the translators made that "fall well outside the commonly accepted practices in the field." She says that in two places in the translation it says the opposite of what it actually says in the original, both to Judas's benefit. For instance, the translation says Judas has been set apart *for* the "holy generation" instead of *from* it, which is how the translated text should read.

"How could these serious mistakes have been made?" Connick asks. "Were they genuine errors or was something more deliberate going on?"

But I'm willing to take the Gospel of Judas at face value, which is quite a concession when you're dealing with a traitor, not to mention translators with an anti-Christian ax to grind.

Overall the Gospel of Judas is so nebulous as to be largely incomprehensible in general, though the four scholars who worked on it bend over backwards to make it seem otherwise. They add subheads (seventeen in all) and so many footnotes that they rival the actual text in length, in a vain

effort, in my view, to give the manuscript a structure and meaning and wholeness that it plainly lacks. And there are so many ellipses where the manuscript is missing words (sometimes every other word for several lines) or even a missing line or two ... or, in two spots, fifteen and seventeen!

But it doesn't much matter, because the passages that are intact are laughable, if you can use that word for a subject that's so vital. Speaking of laughter, Judas's Jesus is a caricature of the one portrayed in depth in the New Testament. Judas's Jesus, for instance, has a mocking sense of humor:

*The disciples said to (him), "Master, why are you laughing at (our) prayer of Thanksgiving."*

And again, to Judas:

*When Jesus heard this, he laughed and said to him, "You thirteenth spirit, why do you try so hard? But speak up, and I shall bear with you."*

The Jesus portrayed in the four canonical Gospels, two of which were written by his apostles, is never shown laughing at anything, let alone at a "prayer of Thanksgiving." But he is shown weeping. Jesus was the mocked, not the mocker.

So Jesus is no morbid "man of sorrows" in Judas's gospel, he's more like a yogi. But what does Isaiah know? He only foretold, centuries before Jesus was born, not only what Jesus would accomplish but even what he would generally look like ("he has no form nor comeliness").

The Gospel of Judas can be summed up, I think, if such a jumble can be summed up, with the lyric from the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil"—"As heads is tails." The Judas gospel exists in an alternate reality where everything is the opposite as it seems.

Judas, of course, is the “star” of this disjointed fable—a footnote actually calls him that. Other than that the Gnostic machinery, like the tropes in a genre novel, are all here for the itchy eared. There are references to esoteric figures like Barbelo, Saklas, Yaldabaoth, Sophia, Seth (Gnostics are big on the third son of Adam, as are New Agers, one of its seminal works being the so-called channelings of the *Seth Material*). And it is not repentance from sin and belief in God’s son that are needed, but knowledge and enlightenment. Lucifer means “bringer of light.” *Gnosis* is Greek for “knowledge.” Gnostics seek hidden knowledge, a mystical experience, as the way to achieve ultimate salvation.

By contrast, when Jesus is put on trial at the high priest Caiaphas’s palace the same night he is arrested, he tells the kangaroo court: “I spake openly to the world ... and in secret have I said nothing.” In the Gospels Jesus says you must become like a child—not a guru—to be saved.

If Judas is to be exalted, the other apostles must be debased. When Judas’s Jesus tells the apostles that “no generation of the people that are among you will know me,” they get mad and “began blaspheming against him in their hearts.” Apparently Judas, equal to his master, can read the other apostles’ minds. And Jesus, of course, recognizes his betrayer’s obvious superiority:

*Knowing that Judas was reflecting on something that was exalted, Jesus said to him, “Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom.”*

Now the absurdist stage is set for the anticlimax—the transfiguration of Judas. Jesus informs him of his reward: he will rise above the twelve “because you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” Jesus tells Judas to look up at a cloud lit up in the night sky and the stars around it.

“The star that leads the way,” Jesus says, “is your

star.”

The dénouement, a footnote helpfully informs us, is “subtle and understated.” The Gospel of Judas ends with scribes who are waiting outside the last supper asking Judas what he’s doing there, since he is one of Jesus’s disciples. Presumably meaning why is Judas outside the room instead of inside.

*Judas answered them as they wished. And he received some money and handed him over to them.*

That’s it. Just Judas doing his duty like the humble servant-traitor he is, or is pretending to be.

We are given a very different view of Judas in the New Testament Gospels, which Christians believe were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Most of what we know about Judas comes from Matthew and John, which is not surprising since they were fellow apostles with him.

There are few spots that Judas sympathizers try to exploit in their attempt to vindicate him. First they claim that Jesus appointed him to be his betrayer. Jesus tells his disciples at the last supper that one of the them will betray him, and he points him out by giving him a piece of unleavened bread soaked in wine. “And after the sop,” Matthew writes, “Satan entered into him.”

So Judas didn’t ask for the dirty but all-important job, his apologists say. That’s why Satan is shown empowering Judas only *after* Jesus selected him. Jesus needed someone who understood exactly what needed to be done and why, and could be counted on to do it right— “That thou doest, do quickly,” as John’s gospel says.

But both Matthew and John agree that Judas had already applied for the job without being solicited. In other words, though Jesus knew who would betray him, since he is God and



knows all things, Judas didn't know he'd been selected. That means he had to be a willing participant in order to be selected. This is the free will vs. determination debate. Judas chose to betray his master, though Jesus knew all along it would be Judas.

And this conclusion is supported by other verses, such as the ones about the blood money. In Matthew's gospel we see Judas go to Jesus's murderers *before* the last supper, not the other way around. Judas must have been well informed of the chief priests' intentions before he went to them with his dastardly plan.

The money also provides Judas's motive. It was no paltry amount, as I noted earlier. And Judas, whom both Matthew and John identify as the apostolic treasurer, would have been not only good with money but probably very desirous of it too. John declares that Judas's anger over the expensive ointment that Lazarus's sister anoints Jesus with was a pretense of concern for the poor, whom Judas says the ointment could've been sold for.

This belies, I think, the claim that Judas was a misguided zealot and was just trying to jumpstart the unworldly Jesus to assume his temporal kingship of Israel and defeat the Romans. John flat out calls him a "thief."

Then there's Judas's suicide. John skips it, but Matthew doesn't:

*Judas ..., when he saw that he (Jesus) was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders,*

*Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.*

Judas, like most useful idiots who have outlived their usefulness, is told by his users to get lost. So he tosses the

money on the temple floor and takes off and hangs himself.

But Matthew says Judas “repented himself” and acknowledged “I have sinned.” Of course Jesus tells people that to follow him, to obtain eternal salvation, they must “repent and believe.” Judas may have repented what he did, but it’s obvious that he did not believe. It’s interesting that interwoven into the Passion is Peter’s own betrayal. And though Peter didn’t help crucify Jesus like Judas did, Peter’s denial of Jesus was egregious, especially in light of his boast at the last supper that he would die before he’d deny being a follower of his master. But Peter repented *and* believed—he “wept bitterly,” Matthew tells us, and not only didn’t Peter kill himself but he became the leader of the new church.

The creation of the Christian church, in fact, is the last time we hear about what happened to Judas. In the first chapter of Acts, as the eleven apostles gather to pick Judas’s replacement, Peter, fittingly, recaps Judas’s fate:

*Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out.*

But doesn’t Matthew say the chief priests bought the field, to be used to bury strangers, with the tainted blood money? And didn’t Judas hang himself?

First I think an unbiased reader can see that what Luke means is not that the field was bought by Judas personally, but by his wicked deed, that is, “the reward of iniquity.”

Similarly the graphic description of Judas’s fate can be credibly seen as complementing, not contradicting (as Borges and others say), Matthew’s report that Judas hung himself. How could Judas have fallen “headlong” so that his insides “gushed out” unless it was from a height, like a limb

that Judas hung himself from? Perhaps the tree was near a cliff and the noose loosened, or Judas was cut down, and he was dashed against rocks in the burial ground bought with the “reward of iniquity.” John MacArthur says something like this. Divine and poetic justice.

The apostles then pray to the Lord and ask him to appoint Judas’s replacement,

*That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.*

What Judas did was a “transgression,” not a holy mission. There’s no doubt what place Peter means. It’s not an illuminated cloud surrounded by stars with one leading the way, but a lake illuminated with fire and brimstone. Which is a fitting place for, as John calls him, “the son of perdition”—the exact opposite and unequivocal enemy of the Son of God.

[Table of Contents](#)

---

Jeff Plude, a former daily newspaper reporter and editor, is a freelance writer and editor. He lives near Albany, New York.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)