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Kissing Heaven's Door: the Medieval Legend of Judas Iscariot

J.S. Mackley

No una cosa, todas las cosas que la tradición atribuye a Judas Iscariote son falsas

Thomas de Quincey, *Speculative and Theological Essays*

When I was working on my thesis on *The Voyage of St Brendan*, one of the most interesting parts (to me, at least) was Brendan's encounter with Judas Iscariot in which Judas is apparently offered a day of respite from hell once a week for the good deeds he performed in his life, and Brendan intercedes on his behalf to secure a further day of release from torture. The opening of this section of the thesis was horrendously laden with irrelevant details and philosophical debates concerning the problems of demonising Judas. Furthermore, it was close to turning into the thesis into a project about Judas alone. My supervisor politely told me that the material relating to Judas 'is well known and need not be addressed here'. The problem was that even looking through the Gospels, there were horrendous discrepancies. But almost all of the material that I used for the upgrade was excised, and the project was whittled down to addressing issues relevant to my texts, rather than meandering off on what I refer to as 'the scenic route'.

This paper is in three sections: the first is to briefly summarise my research on the presentation of Judas in the gospels, in historical documents and in material that was being circulated as the early Church was being developed; in effect it's to show how the legend of Judas was developing. The second section is to analyse the development of the Judas Legend in the *Vita* of Judas; and finally, I shall look at the presentation of Judas in the *Medieval Gospel of Barnabas*. Obviously, I'll only be looking at Judas in these documents, and this paper will serve only as an introduction to them. Close reading, as I'm finding, is much more of a book-length project, rather than something I can cover in an evening.

Part 1: Canonical, historical and apocryphal sources

When we consider Judas Iscariot as he appears in the Bible in modern terms, we might think along the lines of a pantomime villain. His name is intertwined with the betrayal that it's almost tempting to 'boo' him as he is introduced in the gospels. He's always introduced last in the list of disciples and his betrayal of Jesus is underscored to the point of overkill right from the beginning: 'Judas Iscariot: who betrayed him':

... Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (Matthew 10:4)

... and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (Mark 3:19)

... Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Luke 6:16)

... Then Jesus replied, 'Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!' (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.) (John 6:70-71)

All Biblical quotations in this paper have been taken from the New International version

It's always struck me as odd that it's only Judas that is introduced in this way. Peter is never introduced as 'Simon Peter, who denied him' or 'Thomas Didymus, who doubted him'.

Judas is so integral to the completion of the scriptures that Jesus tells him 'friend, what you do, do quickly'. This is the only remotely positive line that relates to him. He is only mentioned eighteen times in the four gospels and the Book of Acts, so his reputation as 'betrayed', 'traitor', 'thief' and even a 'devil' are established as economically as possible

According to the gospels:

Judas was a thief

He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. (John 12:6)

Judas was a devil

... Then Jesus replied, 'Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!' (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.) (John 6:70-71)

Judas betrayed Jesus

And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. (Luke: 22:5)

Judas hanged himself

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. (Matt 27:5)

Those are the facts as presented in the gospels. Those are the facts for which Judas is irredeemably damned.

If I were a lawyer, I would be looking for discrepancies between the four testimonies so that I could suggest that there was 'reasonable doubt' for the jury to consider. Here are a few questions I might ask:

Was Judas the instigator in the objection of Jesus being anointed, was it the disciples as a whole, or was it just 'some people'?

- **When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. 'Why this waste?' they asked. (Matthew 26:8)**
- **Some of those present were saying to one another 'Why this waste of perfume?' (Mark 14:4)**
- **Omitted from Luke**
- **But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?' (John 12:9)**

Did Judas ask for money? Was he offered it? Did money change hands? If so, how much?

Then one of the Twelve – the one called Judas Iscariot – went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What will you give me if I hand him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. (Matthew 26:14-15)

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. (Mark 14:10-11)

They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented. (Luke 22:5-6)

A large crowd of people found out Jesus was there and came, not only to see him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him, many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him (John 12: 9-11)

...

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon to betray Jesus (John 13:2)

...

As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

‘What you are about to do, do quickly,’ Jesus told him. (John 13: 27)

Did Judas betray Jesus with a kiss?

- **Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them. ‘The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.’ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said ‘Greetings Rabbi!’ and kissed him. (Matthew 26: 48-49)**
- **Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: ‘The one I kiss is the man; arrest him, and lead him away under guard.’ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said ‘Rabbi!’ and kissed him. (Mark 26: 44-45)**
- **While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him. But Jesus asked him, ‘Judas, are you betraying the son of Man with a kiss?’ (Luke 22: 47-48)**



Suicide of Judas,
Slapton, Northants C.14/15

- **Now, Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches and lanterns and weapons.**
- **Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’**
- **‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied.**
- **‘I am he,’ Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) (John 18: 2-5)**

How did Judas die?

Judas hanged himself

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. (Matthew 27:5)

The Field of Blood

(With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.) (Acts 1:18)

As I said earlier, the theological discussion is given here in summary, but this simply highlights that the canonical gospels and the first chapter of the Book of Acts, assumed to have been written by Luke, represent the **ONLY** source that we have for Judas. He does not appear in the earliest Biblical writings – the epistles that have *definitely* been attributed to Paul. Nor does his influence on the foundation of Christianity extend to any of the historical testimonies that mention Jesus or early Christianity (admittedly, these post-date the Crucifixion by many decades). We may note that of those sources that mention Jesus and Christianity, there are some important historians that bear witness to these events (or events of which they have heard reports): Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Josephus, Mara ben Serapion, to name but a few. None of them mention Judas; but then, the study of history teaches us that simply because something does not appear in historical documents does not mean that it doesn't exist. However, the principal point is that without the gospels, Judas would have vanished into obscurity. Therefore, he is characterised by his betrayal of Jesus, or this is how the composers of the gospels have chosen to identify him.

As early Christian writings were separately circulated – those that were eventually collated into what we now know as 'The New Testament' – there were other writings, other gospels and other apocryphal stories that mentioned Judas at the same time. He is mentioned in a number of apocryphal stories: these Apocrypha, or hidden writings, are stories about Biblical characters that purport to fill in the gaps in the Bible. There is very little mentioned about the life of the infant Jesus, so, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas corrects this with a story of a somewhat surly child who uses his divine powers to wreak revenge on other children, to turn pieces of clay into sparrows, and even containing a thinly veiled threat against Joseph when the latter rebukes him. So too, does Jesus encounter Judas. The infant Judas hits Jesus in the place where Jesus is later pierced by the spear. Thus, an enmity is shown between Jesus and Judas right from the childhood.

In other Apocryphal gospels, Judas is seen to sell Jesus for thirty silver pieces of gold (sic), and on another occasion, his wife chides him that the cock she is roasting is no more likely to come back from the dead than Jesus is likely to return. Needless to say, their lunch raises his objections to being eaten, inspiring Judas to go and hang himself.

There are other stories, but we get the general picture of the traditional view of Judas as the early Church was developing. Origen (185-c.254), Bishop of Alexandria, certainly knew of a tradition through which the Apostles betrayed Jesus; however, he does not attribute this to Judas alone, nor does he consider Judas a thoroughly corrupt person. However, Origen is censured elsewhere by his doctrines wanting to save everyone.

Origines omnes salvans dampnatur vesanie,
 Quem post mortum legimus percutsum anathemate
 Quod sint libri eius tincti multiformi scismate.

(Origen, who tries to save everyone, is condemned because of his insanity; after his death – so we can read – he was excommunicated since his books are infected by various heresies.)¹

¹ P. Meyer (ed), 'Vers Satires', in *Romania* 11 (1892), 378-79)

There were contradictions in the Judas episodes of the Bible such as Judas's hanging – although hanging was not considered taboo as it is considered now: it's not until Augustine's discussion on suicide that it came to have such a stigma attached to it.² (In fact, there are six suicides in the Bible, including King Saul, father of David, and Samson. There is little difference between these honourable deaths and the virgin martyrs who choose death rather than dishonour.)

The suggestion is that Judas's hanging failed and that he later fell headlong into the field of blood and his stomach burst open. This means that Judas's soul can leave his body without passing through the mouth that kissed Jesus. Rather than trying to resolve such contradictions, commentators such as Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis, had more violent and shameful descriptions. Writing around 130 CE, Papias described how, after the betrayal, Judas:

went about in this world as a great model of impiety. He became so bloated in the flesh that he could not pass through a place that was easily wide enough for a wagon – not even his swollen head could fit. They say that his eyelids swelled to such an extent that he could not see the light at all; and a doctor could not see his eyes even with an optical device, so deeply sunken they were in the surrounding flesh. And his genitals became more disgusting and larger than anyone's; simply by relieving himself, to his wanton shame, he emitted pus and worms that flowed through his entire body. And they say that after he suffered numerous torments and punishments, he died on his own land, and that land has been, until now, desolate and uninhabited because of the stench. Indeed, even to this day no one can pass by the place without holding his nose. This was how great an outpouring he made from his flesh on the ground.³

So, it's that kind of commentary that inspired the traditional demonisation of Judas: for Papias, who has reduced Judas to a series of bodily ailments, physical deformity and spiritual corruption are linked. However, it's true that not all documents that have been released present Judas in such a negative light. A second-century treatise, published in April 2006, claimed to be a discussion between Jesus and Judas a few days before Passover. Its subtitular name is given as *The Gospel of Judas*, and it presents Judas in a much more positive light. As I have said

² Augustine on Suicide: **Chapter 17.—Of Suicide Committed Through Fear of Punishment or Dishonour.**

And consequently, even if some of these virgins killed themselves to avoid such disgrace, who that has any human feeling would refuse to forgive them? And as for those who would not put an end to their lives, lest they might seem to escape the crime of another by a sin of their own, he who lays this to their charge as a great wickedness is himself not guiltless of the fault of folly. For if it is not lawful to take the law into our own hands, and slay even a guilty person, whose death no public sentence has warranted, then certainly he who kills himself is a homicide, and so much the guiltier of his own death, as he was more innocent of that offence for which he doomed himself to die. Do we justly execrate the deed of Judas, and does truth itself pronounce that by hanging himself he rather aggravated than expiated the guilt of that most iniquitous betrayal, since, by despairing of God's mercy in his sorrow that wrought death, he left to himself no place for a healing penitence? How much more ought he to abstain from laying violent hands on himself who has done nothing worthy of such a punishment! For Judas, when he killed himself, killed a wicked man; but he passed from this life chargeable not only with the death of Christ, but with his own: for though he killed himself on account of his crime, his killing himself was another crime. Why, then, should a man who has done no ill do ill to himself, and by killing himself kill the innocent to escape another's guilty act, and perpetrate upon himself a sin of his own, that the sin of another may not be perpetrated on him?

³ Papias, Fragment Four, cited in Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 9–10.

earlier, apocryphal writings, particularly apocryphal gospels purport to fill in the gaps between the episodes of the gospels.

The Gospel of Judas discusses various Gnostic ideas: the disciples describe Jesus as the ‘Son of our God’ (that is, the God of the Old Testament). Judas, however, states that Jesus is from the realm of Barbelo: effectively from the beginning of time (if we consider that John’s Gospel says that ‘in the beginning was the word’, and yet Barbelo is the thought that inspired the word).

This is the first thought, his image; she became the womb of everything for it is she who is prior to them all, the Mother-Father, the first man, the holy spirit, the thrice male, the thrice powerful, the thrice named androgynous one, and the eternal aeon among the invisible ones, and the first to come forth.

~The Apocryphon of John

The Gospel describes how Jesus sees something in Judas that is not apparent in any of the other disciples. He speaks to him privately, promising to reveal ‘the mysteries of the Kingdom’. Although He states it is possible for Judas to reach the kingdom, he will ‘grieve a great deal’. This is one of the examples of foreshadowing the events described in the canonical Gospels. The early Gnostic Christians would have been aware of Judas’s handing over of Jesus and the subsequent crucifixion, and would thus be aware of the significance of this line, as well as the importance of Judas’s actions.

‘You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations-and you will come to rule over them’

...

‘But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.’

...

Their high priests murmured because [he] had gone into the guest room for his prayers. But some scribes were there watching carefully in order to arrest him during the prayer, for they were afraid of the people, since he was regarded by all as a prophet.

They approached Judas and said to him, ‘What are you doing here? You are Jesus’ disciple.’

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

~The Gospel of Judas

It foreshadows Judas’s misery by warning he will ‘grieve a great deal’ and ‘will be cursed by other generations’, and yet, because of his actions, he ‘will come to rule over them’. Judas is not described as avaricious, a ‘thief’, a ‘devil’, nor is he listed amongst the disciples as the one ‘who betrayed Him.’ However, Judas is presented as an intellectual, described as the ‘thirteenth spirit’ because he has been set apart from the other disciples. Perhaps Judas has even touched by God to understand the mysteries that Jesus recounts. They discuss cosmology, chaos and the

underworld. Jesus tells Judas that he will ‘sacrifice the man that clothes me’, in other words, to free Jesus from the physical constraints of his human body, and allow the liberation of the spiritual person within.

The Gospel ends with Judas visiting the high priests. The final line before the titular subscript is that Judas ‘received some money and handed him [Jesus] over to them’. This last detail conforms to the canonical Gospels’ statement that Judas received thirty pieces of silver as payment for handing over Jesus. However, the text ends before the crucifixion and has indirectly stated that the resurrection is not only unnecessary, but it is not what Jesus seeks. Yes, there was a crucifixion, but no, there wasn’t a resurrection. It wasn’t necessary.

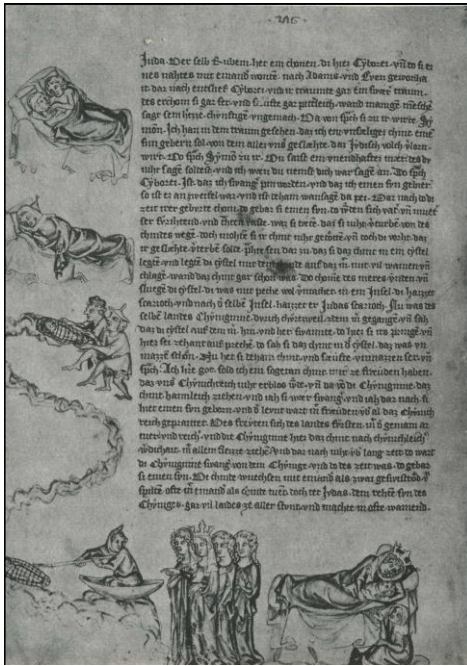
This emphatically shows that Judas was doing Jesus’ bidding. No ‘betrayal’. Judas is the only one that understands Jesus.

Frieda Tchacos Nussberger, who finally obtained the gospel for reconstruction, translation and publication, described her role in the gospel as being ‘predestined by Judas to rehabilitate him’, although sentimentalist words like these give little credence to the scholarship that could surround the Gospel of Judas and only serve for the promotion of the publication of the Gospel. Nussberger clearly knows better than to advocate that the Gospel of Judas authentically details a gap in the gospels. It merely presents an alternative reading of a scene, discussing ideas of second century Gnostic Christianity, and it was promptly censured by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, in 180 AD in his volume ‘Against Heresies’ where he described it as containing many falsehoods:

Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons, are related to themselves. On this account, they add, they have been assailed by the Creator, yet no one of them has suffered injury. For Sophia was in the habit of carrying off that which belonged to her from them to herself. 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.

Although the gospel of Judas portrays Judas in a positive light, this is the exception to the norm. Judas – the betrayer of Jesus – is the epitome of evil, and I want to turn now to the two medieval texts that deal with Judas in very different ways.

Part 2: THE VITA OF JUDAS



The first medieval text that I want to consider is the *Vita* of Judas in the *Legenda Aurea*, dating from the twelfth century. Now, we have probably come across many kinds of *vitae* in the past, describing miracles, pious deeds and martyrdom of the saints, and sometimes all three. These *vitae* were composed to be read out in church and to inspire the congregation to follow the pious examples of the saints. It therefore seems inappropriate to include a *vita* of Judas amongst this collection. Judas's life is that of an anti-saint. This *vita* demonstrates Judas's unavoidable spiral into damnation. This pious blackening of Judas's character is not based on Christian tradition, but a version of the Oedipus legend that had been translated into the vernacular.

Many may not be familiar with the story contained in the *vita* of Judas, but they will certainly be familiar with concepts raised in the story. Judas's

mother, Cyborea, dreams on the night of his conception that Judas will kill a queen's son, marry his mother and then betray his saviour for thirty pieces of silver. His father, Reuben thinks that the dream is a temptation by the devil. The mother suckles the child for a month, and then, if fear of him, casts him adrift on in a barrel; the sea casts it up on the island of Scarioth – this is one of the suggestions for the meaning if his name, Jehuda Ish – Kerioth, the Jew from Kerioth. There are many other suggestions for the origin of the name of Judas:

The name could indicate the place from which Judas originated. The Semitic form of Iscariot is 'Iscarioth'. The prefix 'Ish' is connected with a hometown. The name would therefore be interpreted as 'from Kerioth'.

It could be a corruption of the Latin word *sicarius* meaning murderer or assassin. The historian Flavius Josephus vilifies a radical group of Jewish zealots – the *Sicarii* – stating they were assassins, known by the Arabic-style, curved dagger called a *sicae* that they carried.

The name 'may derive from the Aramaic *Saqor* meaning 'of red colour'.

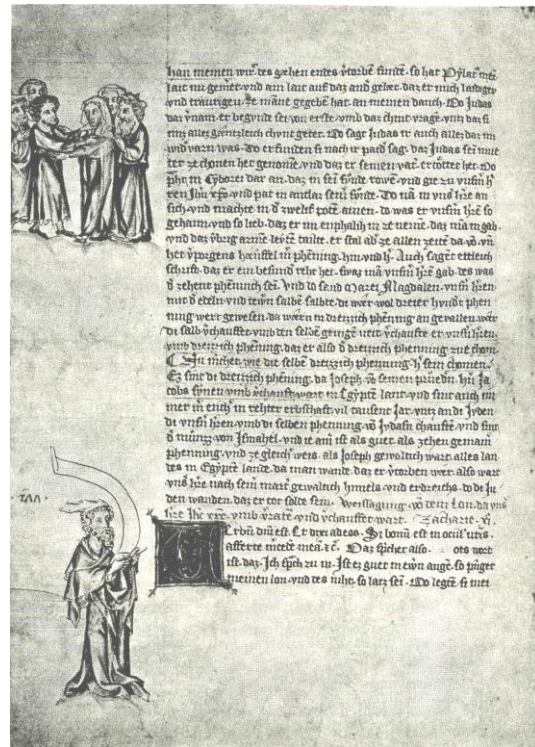
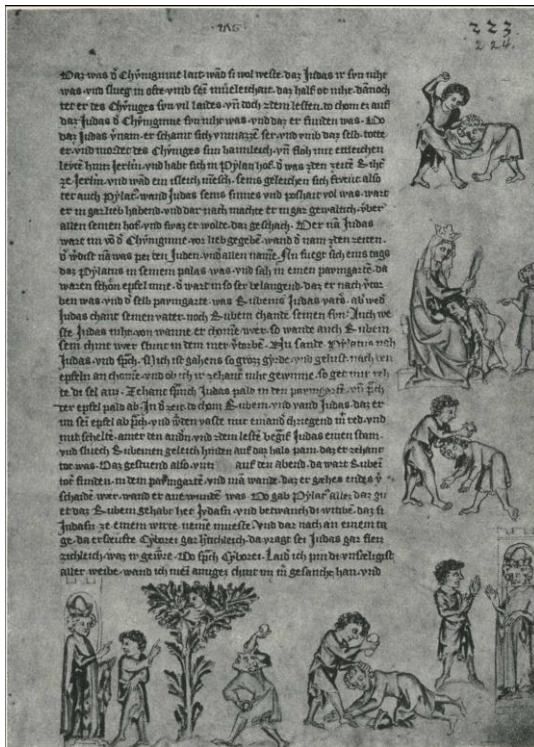
It could be derived from the Hebrew *Shachar* meaning false one, which could be an allusion to the betrayal. The Aramaic *sheqarya'* or *shiqrai* indicates a person who is a fraud ("the false one" would usually be written as *ishqaraya*), while in the Aramaic Palestinian dialect *shakri* means hypocrite or liar

It could be considered that the name Iscariot denotes the deed of betrayal itself. The Hebrew *sachar*, which is used in Isaiah meaning 'to capture, to hand over, or to deliver'. One may view this as a simple translation, if only the suffix and the prefix have been added to make the name (I)skarot(h).

The queen of Kerioth, longing for a child, finds Judas and is pleased by his beauty. She hides him, pretends that he is pregnant and passes him off as her own child. When she gives birth to her own child, he has to endure beatings from Judas, who is bigger. His howls anger the queen, who informs Judas of his origins and threatens to

exile him if he hits her son again. Judas, alone with the victim in the queen's house, kills him with his knife. Judas flees to Jerusalem and enters the service of Pontius Pilate, Pilate being impressed by his beauty.

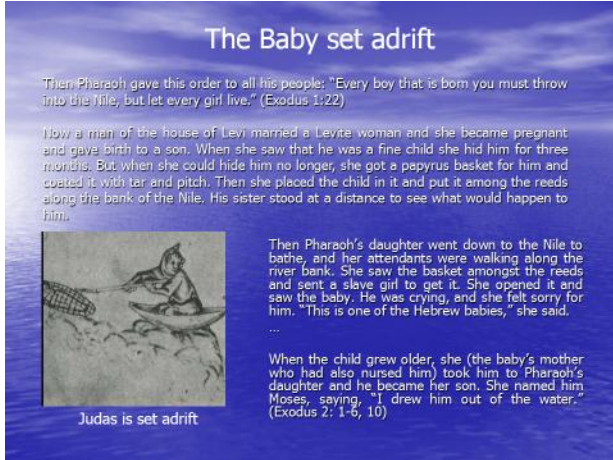
Always zealous in Pilate's service, he brings him apples from Reuben's beautiful apple tree, which Reuben would have willingly given him. But by hewing down the branches with his sword and so damaging the tree, he quarrels with Reuben. Judas kills him with the sword. Cyborea complains to Pilate, who advises Judas to take the rich widow as his wife. He does so and thus completes the prophecy.



One day, thinking tearfully of the son she cast adrift twenty seven years earlier, she tells Judas about the dream and what she did. He realises his accused fate and repents. On his knees, he begs his mother's forgiveness and obtains it. He goes to Jesus, who forgives his sins, accepts him as one of the disciples and makes him an apostle and the treasurer. The vita ends with Judas stealing from the purse and discovering that the ointment with which Jesus was anointed was worth three hundred pence, for which he would have been able to take thirty pieces: 'by that same greedy treachery he sold our lord for thirty pence, so that he got the thirty pence in any case'. There is no mention of the crucifixion or any detail of how Judas handed over Jesus, but then the audiences of the Golden Legend would have been familiar with these events and it was not necessary to underscore them.

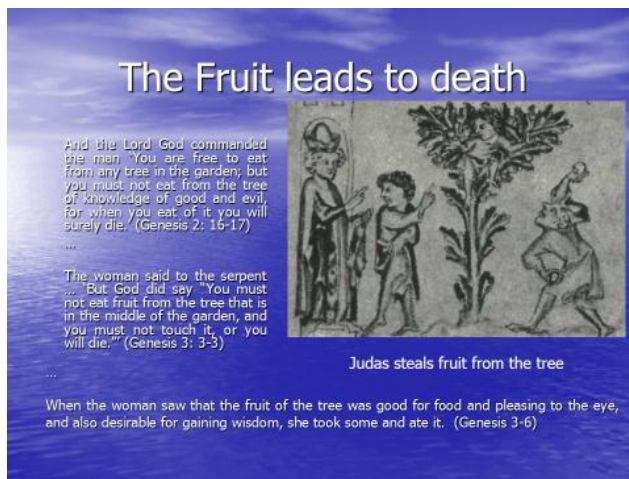
Although the basis of the *Vita* of Judas has its foundation in the legend of Oedipus (killed his father and married his mother), these would not have been familiar tropes for the audience of the vita, so a number of Biblical sources were also used. Text authorises text, and for the audience of the Vita, where would there be more authority than from the

Bible. Here were themes with which the audience may be familiar. First of all, the idea of the baby that has been cast adrift and adopted by a person of nobility appears in the book of Exodus. It is true that in Exodus, the mother



sets him in the Nile to save him from Pharaoh; in the Oedipus legend, he is set upon the hillside with broken ankles so that he cannot survive, hence his name 'Oedipus', from the Greek, meaning 'swell foot'. As always in these circumstances, fate has a way of intervening to ensure that the prophecies come true. Casting transgressors to sea had been used as a form of punishment during the early middle ages. For example, in the seventh century, St Patrick decreed that a criminal should be fettered and set adrift in a boat made of a single hide, without

oars, rudder or provisions, to go whither providence carried him. As his chances of survival were severely reduced, it was accepted that God was protecting him should he do so. As it was, the criminal's vessel was blown to the Isle of Man where he was rescued by two missionary bishops, whom he eventually succeeded.



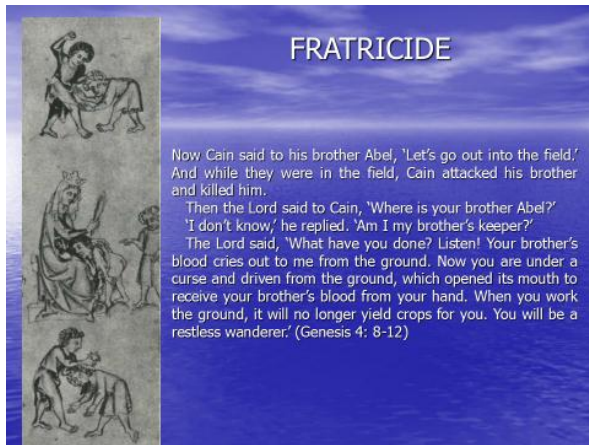
In the *Vita*, Judas also enters his true father's garden and steals apples. This is reminiscent of the serpent in the Garden of Eden which leads to the Fall of Man, just as Judas's actions here foreshadow the betrayal of Jesus. The moment that Judas steals the fruit, his fate is sealed. He is placed on the (almost) irredeemable path of killing his father and marrying his mother. (It's worth mentioning as an aside here that the type of fruit is never mentioned in the Bible and it's the later medieval legend that has been included here. I have cited the *Auchinleck* Life of

Adam here, which dates from around 1330, although the editors say that the manuscript source may well have been much earlier.

He brak Godes comandment.
 God – ybliscd mot he be! –
 He forbade Adam an appel-tre,
 Pat he ne schold of liif no lim
 No frouf þerof nim (ll.70-74).

(He broke God's commandment. God, blessed must he be, he forbade Adam from the apple tree, that he should not, for [sake of] life nor limb take no fruit thereof).⁴

⁴ Brian Murdoch and Jackie Tasioulas (eds.) 'The *Auchinleck* Life of Adam', in *The Apocryphal Lives of Adam and Eve* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press: 2002).



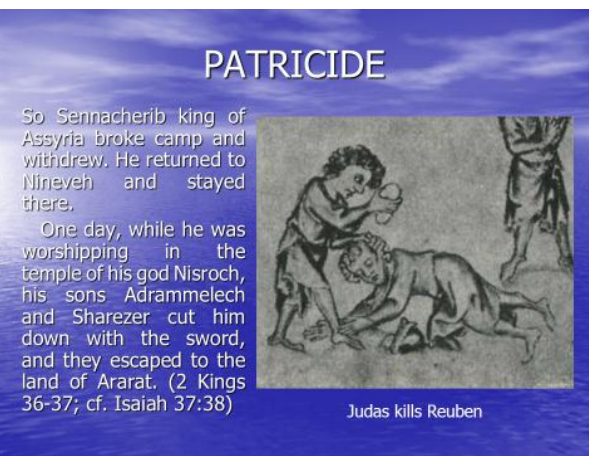
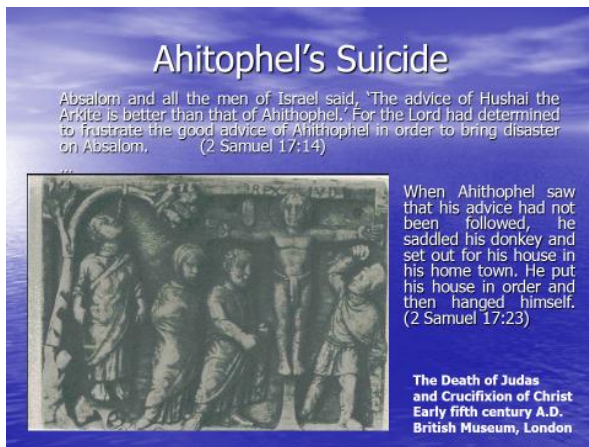
Judas's murder of his brother recalls Cain's fratricide of Abel

The betrayal and subsequent hanging echoes Ahithopel's betrayal of David and his later suicide. In the same way that Judas betrayed Jesus, David was betrayed by Absalom who received advice from Ahithopel, David's erstwhile counsellor. Ahithopel had advised Absalom to attack David while he was weary and weak; however, God frustrated Ahithopel's advice with other counsel from Hushai. When Ahithopel realises that not only has his advice not been followed, but also that David is aware of his part in the treachery, he returns home and hangs himself.⁵

Thinking about patricide, it is, of course, the most despicable offence in the Bible. The fifth commandment is honour your father and your mother, and the book of Deuteronomy demands that disobedient children should be stoned

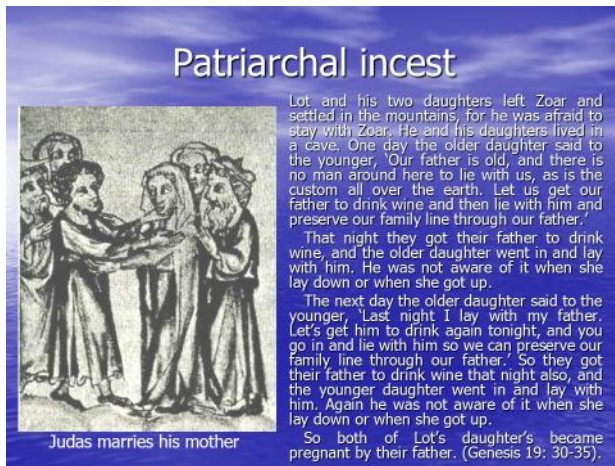
If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when the discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of the town. They shall say to the elders, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.' Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you.

The sin of patricide is a violation of the fifth commandment – Honour your father and your mother – and the sixth – do not commit murder – but it is also, by direct implication, a direct sin against God. As far as I am aware, there is no direct reference to mother-son incest as described between Judas and Cyborea, and, in



the same way, between Oedipus and Jocasta – the term that I use is matrophilia. Although the Oedipus legend seems to be the primary source for this aspect of the Vita of Judas, a variant of parent-child incest is the actions of Lot's daughters. Lot's wife had recently been turned into a pillar of salt for the unforgivable sin of looking back over her shoulder to see the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Having fled to a cave in the mountains and finding no men that had either survived the destruction or were willing to make their way into the mountains, the daughters hatch their own plan.

⁵ 2 Samuel 17:23; Cf. Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 315.



Thus, elements of all of Judas's crimes are found within the Old Testament, although some of them are more explicitly drawn from the Oedipus tradition. Nevertheless, the crimes drawn up against Judas according to the *Vita* are Fratricide (and therefore Murder), theft, patricide matrophilia (and therefore incest) and, after joining the disciples, betrayal and suicide (by this time Augustine had written his treatise of suicide and it was considered the unforgivable crime, quite literally because it was the one crime that you could not ask for forgiveness). These are all crimes that

subvert the natural order of the world. There are other parallels: as with Oedipus, Judas's parents sought to avoid the prophecy, but they only succeeded in putting him on the path that fate had ascribed for him. This is a confounding example of pre-determination against free-will and we could tie ourselves in knots trying to work out whether Cyborea would have set the infant Judas adrift if she had not tried to avoid the prophecy – the answer is probably not. Another parallel is that of Jocasta, who, like Judas, hangs herself – however, this is an incidental comparison, although it may be one of the reasons why the Oedipus legend was chosen as the foundation of the *Vita* of Judas. Unlike, Judas, however, who is not willing to face his guilt, Oedipus blinds himself, so that he cannot see the results of his sin, but he still has to live with his actions.

Like the writers of the gospels, the composer of the *Vita* of Judas is building on a tradition. Later manuscripts say that his father, Reuben, is also called Simon, which is in keeping with gospel tradition. Judas apparently needs no introduction – even in the gospels his betrayal is spelled out from the beginning. The *vita* of Judas shows what it is like to live with a curse, one from which he cannot escape. Even once he has committed all of the crime that subvert the natural order, he is offered a chance at redemption by going to Jesus. However, Cyborea's dream prophecy is that her son would also betray his saviour for thirty pieces of silver. Judas is still unable to turn aside from the path fate has ascribed for him. Despite the fact that he was obviously forgiven for his previous sins, Judas fell again, and despaired of Jesus' mercy – as is described in Matthew's gospel – making his position irredeemable.

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and return the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. 'I have sinned,' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood'.

'What is that to us?' they replied. 'That's your responsibility.'

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. (Matthew 27: 3-5)

The *Vita* of Judas ends with him leaving to join the apostles, and so I have filled in some of the gaps here, but then that's exactly what the early audiences of the *Vita* would have done. The story of Judas's betrayal of Jesus is SO ingrained in our minds that, despite being endowed with a life story – a pious blackening of his name – it is unnecessary to highlight his deeds *after* the *vita*. As an example of this, we are brought up to believe Judas sold

Jesus for thirty pieces of silver and betrayed Jesus with a kiss. These are not mentioned in all of the Gospels, indeed the amount of money is only mentioned in Matthew. Mentally, we fill in the gaps with what we know, or think we know.

But Medieval people were taught not to have any sympathy for Judas. He is the devil incarnate, betrayer of Jesus. He has no redeeming qualities: he is a one-dimensional character. His depiction is more about the betrayal rather than any motivation. Thus, the audience find no sympathy for him. It was during the Middle Ages that the tradition arose that ‘Judas’, a name meaning ‘Jew’, betrayed Jesus, and thereafter the Jews should be labelled and persecuted as Christ-killers.



There is one thing that is missing from the Vita: Judas has been given a life-story to underscore his evil heritage, but all versions fail to provide him with a burial. In later versions of the legend, as show in the passion plays, for example, Judas is carried to hell by devils but is released for a respite once a week for the good deeds he did in his lifetime so that he can describe his tortures in graphic detail in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage of Brendan*.⁶ Furthermore, Judas is in the ninth circle of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*, with Brutus and Cassius, who, as well as being betrayers, are also suicides;

thus Dante balances both the classical Christian worlds. Judas is placed head-first in Lucifer’s central mouth with his back skinned by the devil’s claws.

The Vita of Judas represents an ‘anti-hagiography’ which shows what may happen if one does not attain absolution for their sins. Other forms of anti-hagiography were circulated at the time, for example, the lives of Simon Magus and Pontius Pilate. However, these texts were meant to entertain, but also to instruct and encourage and the norm in these circumstances were to use Biblical and hagiographical examples to introduce us to the sinner that were redeemed: Peter, who denied Jesus, became head of the Church Other hagiographies of the redeemed sinners include Dismas, the good thief crucified with Jesus; and Mary Magdalene, although recently there has been a movement to redeem her from the wrongs that were attributed to her: it was a misreading of the Bible and that Mary should not be associated with the prostitute that is mentioned immediately before. Mary is introduced as a new character. The Vita of Gregory directly parallels the life of Judas, although Gregory spends his penance on a rock in the middle of the ocean (like Judas in the *Voyage of Brendan*), and is eventually forgiven. One of Gregory’s crimes was incest, and here he is linked to Albas and Andrew. They each did worse things than Judas, but they were forgiven. We might consider here a ‘secular hagiography of Sir Gowther: In this narrative, Sir Gowther, the son of a devil, is inherently

⁶ .S. Mackley, ‘The Torturer’s “Art” in the Judas episode of Benedeit’s *Voyage of St Brendan*’ in *Notes and Queries* (April, 2007):24–27.

sinful from birth. It is only direct divine intervention that brings the protagonist to penance and ultimately salvation. Although this is a romance narrative, it shows a conversion to Christianity, more in keeping with a hagiographic document. Indeed, one of the manuscripts of *Sir Gowther* concludes with the line *Explicit vita sancti*.⁷

As for Judas, a twelfth-century manuscript of the Life of Judas from the Vatican ends with a concluding formula for public reading in a monastery ‘But you, O Lord, have mercy upon us. Whoever perseveres in goodness shall be saved.’

After the compilation of the New Testament there was a pious, but apocryphal, blackening of Judas’s name. This continued into the Middle Ages, where, in the tradition of the *vitae* of the saints, there is also a Life of Judas. As the story developed, detailing the early life of Judas, the anti-saint is found guilty of every crime that subverts the natural order: incest, patricide, fratricide, matriphilia to name by a few. Yet there are a few examples that shine out from the dirt surrounding Judas’s name: the *Gospel of Judas* has Jesus recognising that Judas is the only man that understand him. While in the Middle Ages, Judas receives the money from the priests because his ‘sister’ stole money from him that Jesus gave him to buy food and Judas has to get the money from elsewhere.

The Vita of Judas provides the audience with an early life for Judas where none existed, even though we now see the parallels with the Oedipus legend. I propose now to turn to an apocryphal gospel, the Gospel of Barnabas, that contains a variation on the legend of Judas as it appears in what we assume is the early fourteenth century, and how the presentation of the character of Judas has been changed to further vilify his name and, more importantly, an alternative fate to ensure, with perfect irony, how Judas gets his come-uppance.

THE GOSPEL OF BARNABAS

The authenticity of the *Gospel of Barnabas* presents some problems: Muslims believe that the gospel was accepted as canonical in the churches of Alexandria until the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE; consequently, Muslims promote the gospel, believing it to be the ‘true Gospel of Jesus’

Besides the ‘Gospel of Barnabas’, which we maintain is the True Gospel which has not suffered distortions and which speaks for itself about the future advent of Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace be on him), we nonetheless give quotations from other old and new Testaments which together with the Gospel of Barnabas should remove any doubt whatsoever from the minds of readers, as we have presented enough facts for one and all known scriptures of the world, which foretold the coming of the last and final Prophet of God Prophet Mohammad (peace be on him).⁸

The Gospel dismisses the divinity of Jesus and states that, on a few occasions, that the Messiah is yet to come, and that Messiah is named as Mohammed. Muslims obviously value the message of the *Gospel of Barnabas* as it not

⁷ Diana T. Childress, ‘Between Romance and Legend: “Secular Hagiography” in Middle English Literature,’ *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978), p. 317; Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1968), pp. 125–128.

⁸ Lonsdale Ragg and Laura Ragg, *The Gospel of Barnabas* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1997), p. 287–8.

only teaches against the doctrine of the New Testament; it also confirms that Mohammed is God's chosen prophet, and has Jesus denying his divinity and claiming he is only a messenger of God. The Gospel of Barnabas is longer than the four canonical gospels put together. Jesus is no more than a messenger from God, and is certainly not divine. It preaches against the doctrine of the New Testament. Jesus did not die and rise again, instead he ascended into Heaven at Gethsemane

Muslims claim that the Gospel of Barnabas is mentioned by Irenaeus, and based on this statement, claim that the Gospel was in circulation in the first or second centuries. However, the document from which Irenaeus quotes is actually the *Epistle of Barnabas*, a completely different text. Furthermore, during Emperor Zeno's rule in 478, the remains of Barnabas were discovered, and, according to Rahim, buried with him was the gospel written in his own hand.⁹ However, the *Acta Sanctorum* states that the manuscript was in fact the 'Gospel of Matthew, copied by Barnabas himself'.¹⁰ Rahim has chosen to substitute this phrase and instead state that the Gospel is that of Barnabas instead. It is possible that the surviving Gospel of Barnabas contains the remnants from some earlier apocryphal work that has been edited to include Islamic teaching; given that the Gospel denies the resurrection, it is possible that it could be based upon a Gnostic text which would be edited to conform to Islam without too many interpolations.

That said, there are many anachronisms in the *Gospel of Barnabas* which strengthen the suggestion that the *Gospel* was not composed until the Middle Ages. The more general elements include the descriptions the family of Lazarus being overlords of Magdala and Bethany. This kind of feudal rule would have been unheard of in Roman-occupied Palestine. However, there are more specific anachronisms; the Gospel contains quotations attributed to Dante, writing around 1300. Dante's phrase 'false and lying gods' appears numerous times in the Gospel, but it is neither in the Bible nor in the Qur'an.¹¹

'Paradise is so great that no man can measure it. Verily I say unto thee that the heavens are nine, among which are set the planets, that are distant one from another five hundred years journey for a man.'

~The Gospel of Barnabas, 178

'See you not how Allah has created the seven heavens one above another, and made the moon a light in their midst, and made the sun a lamp?'

~ Koran, Surat Nuh 71: 15-16

'Blessed is He in Whose hand is the dominion; and he is able to do all things. Who has created death and life that He may test you which of you is best in deed. And he is the Almighty, the Oft-forgiving; Who has created the seven heavens one above another; you can see no fault in the creation of the Most Gracious

~ Koran, Surat Al-Mulk 67: 1-3

⁹ M.A. Rahim, *The Gospel of Barnabas* (Karachi: Qur'an Council of Pakistan, 1973).

¹⁰ "Acta Sanctorum," vol. 2 (Antwerp: Bolandist Society, 1698).

¹¹ See the *Gospel of Barnabas* chapters 23, 78, 217.

Other ideas advanced by Dante include the concept of nine heavens, which appears in chapter 178 of the gospel. The Qur'an teaches that there are only seven heavens.

The Gospel was known from two manuscripts: George Sale, who translated the Qur'an into English in 1734 mentions a Spanish version written by Mostafa de Aranda, having translated it from the Italian. An Italian monk, Father Marino was alleged to have stolen the Italian manuscript from the library of Pope Sixtus V (1585-90). According to legend, Marino converted to Islam after reading the gospel. Only fragments remain of the Spanish version survive, and the Italian version has been kept in the Austria National Library in Vienna since it was deposited there in 1738.¹² The translations of Lonsdale and Laura Ragg are based upon this Italian manuscript.¹³ The printed edition of the Gospel that I consulted was a late edition (1997) based on the translation of Lonsdale and Laura Ragg, printed in 1907. However the Raggs' edition contained seventy pages of commentary on why the *Gospel of Barnabas* was a medieval forgery; however, not only did the edition that I used omit the commentary; it included appendices on why the Gospel *is* authentic. Furthermore, parts of the printed text in this edition have been 'whited out' and other words replaced.¹⁴

Commentators have attempted to identify the author of the Gospel of Barnabas with the figure that is mentioned in the Book of Acts. In the Gospel, Barnabas is called an apostle of Jesus, although the Canonical Gospels do not list him amongst the apostles. He is mentioned in Acts after the church has been established. After Paul's conversion he immediately began preaching that Jesus was the Son of God; if Barnabas had not accepted the Paul's teaching, Barnabas would have demanded that Paul be silenced, rather than defending his teaching. Furthermore, there are numerous errors within the gospel, which, even assuming that The *Gospel of Barnabas* was written after the canonical gospels, are unacceptable: According to Barnabas, Jesus was born when Pilate was governor; however, Pilate did not achieve this office until 26 CE. There are other Biblical contradictions: if Nebuchadnezzar had imprisoned Daniel when he was only two, and had consulted Daniel to interpret his dreams 'in the second year of his reign' then Daniel would have been only three at the time of the dreams. There are also geographical discrepancies: one example is that Chapters 20 and 21 describe Nazareth as a coastal town, when it is in fact twenty kilometres from the sea and is 1300 feet above sea level. Here, then, the composer of the Gospel of Barnabas reveals little knowledge of Palestinian geography, despite using the canonical gospels as his source.

The Gospel of Barnabas draws on sources from each of the gospels, as well as Old Testament traditions, such as Adam, Moses and Abraham, although in the Gospel it is Ishmael who is to be sacrificed, rather than Isaac. However, its portrayal of Judas relies on interpretations of the canonical gospels, in particular, the Gospel of John.

¹² Ragg and Ragg, *The Gospel of Barnabas*., p. 274.

¹³ Lonsdale Ragg and Laura Ragg, *The Gospel of Barnabas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907).

¹⁴ Ragg and Ragg, *The Gospel of Barnabas*., see for example the word 'prophet' has been inserted to make a phrase read 'holy prophet Mohammed', p. 287.

When Jesus calls the disciples, Judas Iscariot is mentioned last, as one would expect, and he is given the epithet ‘the traitor’. However, Judas is differentiated from the other disciples: the other disciples play a proactive role in Jesus’ mission by asking his questions, and to them Jesus ‘always revealed the divine secrets; but to the Iscariot Judas, he made his dispenser of what was given in alms, but he [Judas] stole the tenth part of everything.’¹⁵ This introduction provides two vital pieces of information about Judas: first, he is called ‘*the* Iscariot’, suggesting that ‘Iscariot’ is a title (possibly *sciarii*?) rather than a given name; secondly, Judas is identified as the treasurer from the outset of the Gospel, unlike the Gospel of John when such a detail is omitted until it is necessary, which is, when Jesus is anointed at Bethany; finally, Jesus reveals divine secrets to the other disciples, but Judas is excluded. Despite having a thief amongst his apostles, Jesus does not include Judas within his close circle, which makes the potential for betrayal more plausible. Indeed, it is later, when Jesus, Peter, James and his brother John descend from mount Tabor having heard the voice of God saying ‘this is my *servant* in whom I am well pleased’ (emphasis added) and explain what they have seen to the other disciples, that the disciples believe in Jesus’ mission ‘save Judas, who believed naught’.

He descended from the mountain, and chose twelve, whom he called apostles, among whom is Judas, who was slain upon the cross. Their names are: Andrew, Peter, Barnabas, who wrote this, John and James, Thaddeus and Judas; Bartholomew and Philip; James and Judas Iscariot the traitor. To these he always revealed the divine secrets: but the Iscariot Judas he made his dispenser of that which he was given in alms, he stole the tenth part of everything.

~The Gospel of Barnabas, 14

As with the canonical gospels, Judas remains quiet until the end of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, which is when Mary, sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus.

While Jesus was supping with his disciples in the house of Simon the leper, behold Mary the sister of Lazarus entered into the house, and, having broken a vessel, poured ointment over the head and garment of Jesus. Seeing this, Judas the traitor was fain to hinder Mary from doing such a work, saying: ‘Go and sell the ointment and bring the money that I may give it to the poor.’

Said Jesus: ‘Why hindrest thou her? Let her be, for the poor ye shall always have with you, but me ye shall not have always.’

Judas answered: ‘O Master, this ointment might be sold for three hundred pieces of money: now see how many poor folk might be helped.’

Jesus answered: ‘O Judas. I know thine heart: have patience therefore, and I will give the all.’

Everyone ate in fear, and the disciples were sorrowful, because they knew that Jesus must soon depart from them. But Judas was indignant, because he knew he was losing thirty pieces of money for the ointment not sold, seeing he stole the tenth part of all that was given to Jesus.

He went to the high priest, who assembled in a council of priests, scribes and Pharisees: to whom Judas spake, saying: ‘What will ye give me, and I will betray into your hands Jesus, who would fain to make himself king of Israel?’

~The Gospel of Barnabas, 205

¹⁵ Ragg and Ragg, *The Gospel of Barnabas*, p. 14.

Here it is explicitly stated that Judas ‘knew that he was losing thirty pieces of money for the ointment not sold, seeing he stole the tenth part of all that was given to Jesus’ and his approaching the high priest follows immediately after, who promises him ‘thirty pieces of gold’ (sic). Thus, in the gospels, the anointing *appears* to be the basis for Judas’s betrayal of Jesus, in the *Gospel of Barnabas* it is explicitly stated. Furthermore, in this scene alone we see that the composer of *Barnabas* has drawn on Matthew (referring to the thirty pieces of money) and John (referring to Judas as treasurer).

As Judas draws near Gethsemane, Archangels take Jesus away. The four Archangels are named as Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel.

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When the soldiers with Judas drew near to the place where Jesus was, Jesus heard the approach of many people, wherefore in fear he drew into the house. And the eleven were sleeping.

Then God, seeing the danger of his servant, commanded Gabriel, Michael, Rafael, and Uriel, his ministers, to take Jesus out of the world. The holy angels came and took Jesus out by the window that looketh towards the south. They bare him and placed him in the third heaven in the company of angels blessing God for evermore.

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Judas entered impetuously before all into the chamber whence Jesus had been taken up. And the disciples were sleeping. Whereupon the wonderful God acted wondrously, insomuch as Judas was so changed in speech and in face to be like Jesus that we believed him to be Jesus. And he, having awakened us, was seeking where the Master was. Whereupon we marvelled, and answered: ‘Thou Lord, art our master; hast thou now forgotten us?’

And he, smiling, said: ‘Now are ye foolish, that know not me to be Judas Iscariot!’

And as he was saying this the soldiery entered, and laid their hands upon Judas, because he was in every way like to Jesus.

~Gospel of Barnabas, 215, 216

Archangels appear infrequently in the Bible: Michael is mentioned three times (Daniel, Jude and Revelation); Gabriel is mentioned once (Luke); and Raphael is only mentioned in the apocryphal book of Tobit. (Michael also appears briefly in the Koran). This changes the emphasis of the Gospel from other Biblical books. Angels are messengers from God – *angelos* being the Greek for messenger – and normally appear to make announcements, such as Gabriel’s Annunciation, or Michael encouraging Daniel. In the *Gospel of Barnabas* the archangels take Jesus away, and at the same time, Judas’s face is changes so that he appears to be Jesus himself. Thus, it is Judas that is arrested in Jesus’ place, and suffers the tortures at the hands of Sanhedrin, even though he protests his innocence ‘I am Judas Iscariot, and not Jesus, who is a magician, and by his art hath so transformed me’ – it’s a wonderful moment of irony, leading Judas to be crucified, and calling to God: ‘God, why hast thou forsaken me, seeing the malefactor hath escaped and I die unjustly’ (217).

The intervention of the archangels demonstrates that Jesus was himself a messenger or a servant of God; he transcends into heaven like Elijah. This also shows, according to the Gospel, that Jesus did not die, and therefore he could not rise again. Not only is this anti-Christian in its suggestions (even though it shows Jesus' divinity), it ties us back to the Gospel of Judas that states that the resurrection never happened (although in the Gospel of Judas, it was just unnecessary: Jesus wished for Judas to 'sacrifice the man that clothes me' so that he could be freed from his worldly human body).

The medieval copies of the *Gospels of Barnabas* state that it was Judas instead of Jesus who was crucified. The Gospel states that after having led the Roman soldiers to Gethsemane, Judas's appearance was changed to that of Jesus; Jesus had already ascended into the third heaven. The transformation was so thorough that initially even Mary believed that it was her son being crucified.

Those disciples who did not fear God went by night [and] stole the body of Judas and hid it, spreading a report that Jesus was risen again; whence great confusion arose. The high priest then commanded, under pain of Anathema, that no one should talk of Jesus of Nazareth.

~The Gospel of Barnabas, 218

The Gospel of Barnabas states that Judas's body was stolen from the grave three days after the crucifixion and rumours circulated that Jesus had risen from the dead, and upon hearing this in heaven, Jesus returned and explained the truth to his mother and remaining disciples. Thus, he will come back at the end of times as a just king.

The concept that the man crucified upon the cross was not Jesus has long been debated. The normal candidate for this suggestion is Judas Thomas Didymus: both 'Thomas' and 'Didymus' translate as 'twin', and thus it is suggested that Thomas Didymus was Jesus' twin who took his place on the cross at Calvary. However, the statement in the Gospel of Barnabas that it was Judas who took Jesus' place. This is also the message of the Koran. The Koran describes the death of Jesus thus:

They [those that deny Allah and his Apostles] **hid** the truth and uttered a monstrous falsehood against Mary. They declared: 'we have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah.' They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.¹⁶

Muslim polemic literature suggests that this deception was woven by Judas to defend Jesus and to save him from crucifixion. It thus removes Judas from his almost constant reputation as betrayer. The Koran also states that Jesus did not die, but was lifted up to heaven by Allah 'until the day of Resurrection', which is the message presented by the Gospel of Barnabas. ad-Dimashqi, a fourteenth century cosmographer, states that Judas claimed to be Jesus and was crucified in His place. Mandeville repeats this in his *Travels*, but states that it was God that changed Judas's image, inferring that there was no noble sacrifice of Judas's behalf.

¹⁶ The Koran, trans N. J. Dawood (London: Penguin, 1990).

Also this book speaketh of Jews and saith that they be cursed; for they would not believe that Jesu Christ was come of God. And that they lied falsely on Mary and on her son Jesu Christ, saying that they had crucified Jesu the son of Mary; for he was never crucified, as they say, but that God made him to sty up to him without death and without annoy. **But he transfigured his likeness into Judas Iscariot, and him crucified the Jews, and weened that it had been Jesus. But Jesus styed to heavens all quick.** And therefore they say, that the Christian men err and have no good knowledge of this, and that they believe folily and falsely that Jesu Christ was crucified. And they say yet, that and he had been crucified, that God had done against his righteousness for to suffer Jesu Christ, that was innocent, to be put upon the cross without guilt. And in this article they say that we fail and that the great righteousness of God might not suffer so great a wrong: and in this faileth their faith. For they knowledge well, that the works of Jesu Christ be good, and his words and his deeds and his doctrine by his gospels were true, and his miracles also true; and the blessed Virgin Mary is good, and holy maiden before and after the birth of Jesu Christ; and that all those that believe perfectly in God shall be saved. And because that they go so nigh our faith, they be lightly converted to Christian law when men preach them and shew them distinctly the law of Jesu Christ, and when they tell them of the prophecies.

John Mandeville, *Travels*, Chapter XV

Mandeville's *Travels* is full of fabrications so that many scholars believe that the furthest John Mandeville travelled was as far as his local library. Here it appears that he is repeating lesser-known medieval traditions from the Gospel of Barnabas in order to substantiate his claim of travelling.

So, what does the Gospel of Barnabas lend to our understanding of Judas? First of all, despite its importance to Islam that this text denies the resurrection and heralds the coming of Muhammad, this is a medieval text – it contains medieval ideas and phrases. It is greatly indebted to the all of the canonical gospels, and has been worked over by Muslim scribes – and this editing is hardly unique to Islam: Christians did it all the time with histories. What it does show, in glorious irony, is that the plan that Judas had completely backfired on him, and he experiences the torture and humiliation he had imagined that Jesus would have to endure, and died the ignoble death by crucifixion meted on criminals, because that's the role with which Judas has been depicted.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, where does this leave us in relation to Judas? The answer is that, as far as historical evidence goes, we are no closer to finding anything more about him. He exists only in the gospels and the Book of Acts. He exists only to fulfil his part in the betrayal and the passion.

What I have tried to show here tonight is a couple of the legends through which our modern understanding of Judas has evolved. The apocryphal gospels, of which I have only used a couple, fill in gaps in Judas's life to show an enmity between Judas and Jesus beginning in childhood. The gospel of Judas shows an attempt to use Judas as a means of conveying Gnostic philosophies. As far as the Pauline church is concerned, this is probably as bad as betrayal, for the Gnostics were trying to promote their heresies, and, although Judas is presented as the only man

that understands Jesus, the ideas that the Jesus character speaks must have had the early Christian church gnashing their teeth in frustration, and it is little wonder that Irenaeus was so quick to censure it.

By the twelfth century, the *Vita of Judas* had been composed to give Judas an evil history, mixing Biblical tropes with the recently discovered classical legend of Oedipus. Unable to break from the prophecy, Judas commits all the crimes that subvert the natural order. He is offered a chance at redemption, and yet returns to his sinful ways to betray Jesus and commit suicide. He shows what it is like to be trapped by fate and to live with a curse. We can argue whether this is a case of freewill against predetermination until we are blue in the face, but Judas cannot turn aside from the destiny prescribed for him.

By contrast, the Gospel of Barnabas, having been worked over by Muslim scholars, not only predicts the coming of Mohammed, but it also places Judas outside the twelve apostles, one who does not accept the teachings of Jesus and therefore does not understand the mysteries of his words. This strikes me as a more plausible situation for Judas to exist, as one particular theological problem has been how could Jesus have allowed Judas into his closest followers knowing, right from the start, that he was ‘a devil’? Although this account totally ignores the fate of Judas as described in Matthew and Acts, Judas gets his come-uppance in a wonderfully ironic scene. The Gospel of Barnabas is still accepted as an Islamic document today, as it ‘predicts’ the coming of Muhammad, and is often printed without the study lasting seventy pages or so, showing why this is a medieval forgery.

I have mentioned briefly Dante’s description of Judas suffering in hell; I have also mentioned the Voyage of Brendan that describes how Judas gets a day of respite for the good deeds that he did in his lifetime. Dante’s description is no doubt closer to how we would imagine Christianity meting out the punishment on the greatest sinner of mankind. The legend of Brendan was extremely popular, but the idea of a Sunday respite has never been sanctioned by the Church. Indeed, although Jesus says ‘The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me is about to betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born’ (Matthew 26: 23-24), The Catholic Church has no official position on whether and how Judas was punished.

The fact remains that, as a society that has Christian teaching at its heart (whether we are Christian or secular), we need Judas. If we follow Frieda Tschacos Nussberger’s claim to want to ‘rehabilitate’ Judas, and indeed, a move by certain German cardinals to want to get Judas canonised, then we argue Judas out of existence. I am not arguing whether Judas was a real person or an allegory, but with what he has come to represent – the human antithesis of the divine – then by trying to get him off the hook means that the dualistic approach to Christianity, the battle of Good and Evil, ceases to have its power. ‘We have someone who has committed the worst atrocities of mankind, let’s forgive him anyway and make him a saint’. Of course, Jesus forgives any sin, but it does involve some kind of

contrition on the part of the sinner, otherwise the concept of good and evil becomes meaningless – do what you want and plead for forgiveness later.

So, Judas remains arch-sinner in our minds and in our heritage; damned for all eternity. It is believed that he kissed Jesus to betray him. If that is the case, he kissed Heaven's door, but never got through himself.

*“Lift up your eyes
and look at the cloud
and the light within it
and the stars surrounding it.
The star that leads the way is your star.”*

~ The Gospel of Judas