

## THE PASSION OF JUDAS: On the Long Literary Trail of Jesus' Betrayer *The Star-Ledger*, April 2006

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### The passion of Judas

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So it turns out Judas Iscariot wasn't such a bad guy after all. An ancient document, second or third century, has now been published after spending the last 20 years in a vault. It reveals that Judas was in fact the greatest hero of the Easter story after Jesus.

According to the National Geographic Society, which secured the rights to the manuscript this evening, Judas is a victim of history who was only doing Jesus' bidding by following Christian teaching, as well as the indelible image of Judas languishing with

Naturally, any effort to rewrite the Christian story will incite passions on all sides. "The passion of Judas" is sure to fire the imagination of those who already think the story of generations of credulous believers (as if "The Da Vinci Code" weren't enough) as another secular effort to undermine the culpability of a despicable turn of

In reality, while the Gospel of Judas is undeniably fascinating as a historical document, it is inimical to the faith as many believers may fear.

That is because Judas is such a confounding figure that believers and scholars have often placed responsibility in Christ's death. Even Saint Peter, speaking centuries before the event, explained his actions by telling the remaining apostles that Jesus was betrayed "according to the scriptures." Peter also has Judas dying by hitting his head in a fall; only the Gospel of Judas says he was killed by a sword.

However, Peter's explanation still leaves us with as great a puzzle as any other: Why would Jesus to choose as one of his 12 apostles a man he knew would betray him? Why would he carry out his treachery. Was this not akin to condemning Judas to eternal damnation in history?

The Gospel of Judas that was unveiled last week is on one level in keeping with the contemporary approach to resolving the mystery of the Passion into something more intelligible to the modern mind. Thus in recent years biblical scholars and archeologists have offered any number of theories. One is that Judas was actually one of the Sicarii, a member of a band of dagger-wielding Jewish freedom fighters who sought the violent overthrow of Rome. Another is that Judas "Isca riot" (the traditional interpretation is that Judas hailed from the town of Kerioth) as well as an explanation for his betrayal, in the film "The Last Temptation of Christ" for the cinematic version of this theory.)

Another persistent explanation is that Judas did not exist at all, but was a later invention by Christian writers who wanted to blame the Passion on Jews. Christian anti-Semitism is a scandal, but even if this theory had much support, erasing Judas from the historical record would be a disservice to the story.

In fact, artists, rather than historians, seem to have been more successful in exploring the emotional -- and spiritual -- truths about the Passion. As Graham Greene wrote in "The End of the Affair," "Hatred seems to operate the same glands as love; it even produces the same tears." The Passion, would we have been able to say from their actions alone whether it was the jealous Judas or the cowardly Peter who

It is a penetrating question that has no easy answers. Jorge Luis Borges wrote "Three Versions of Judas" in order to plumb the nether verlorne Sohn, a reference to the Prodigal Son who finds his way back to the father and ultimate forgiveness. And in the 1971 novel "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot," he depicts Judas as a loyal disciple who reluctantly betrayed Jesus because he feared a Roman backlash against the Jews.

In his 1931 poem "Germinal," George William Russell looked at Judas as an innocent "knight with his doom," almost as Jesus himself:

*In ancient shadows and twilights*

*Where childhood had stray'd,*

*The world's great sorrows were born*

*And its heroes were made.*

*In the lost boyhood of Judas*

*Christ was betray'd.*

A similar theme was explored last year by the playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis in his fierce and provocative drama "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot." The dilemma of Judas nagged Guirgis since his days in Catholic school, and in "Last Days" he tries to win the approval of a judge and jury.

For me, though, it is the Japanese writer Shusaku Endo who answered the question most convincingly, in his 1969 novel "Silence." The hero of the story, a missionary named Sebastian Rodrigues, is full of zeal and idealism as he sneaks into a land where death seems his inevitable fate. Yet as the priest is steadily broken down by his captors, he comes to see himself as closer to the truth. His weaknesses, his doubts, his fears, are all revealed, and he is chosen as the rock on which Christ's church will be built.

Eventually the priest is shorn of even this romantic vision of himself. Devastated by the agonies of Christians being tortured to death, he crushes an image of his beloved Jesus under his foot. By the end of the tale, he has made the journey from idealism to realism.

But does Rodrigues lose his soul? Was his even a true betrayal? Therein hangs the drama of the novel, and the enduring mystery of Jesus on the Cross, when in fact the inescapable condition of human weakness -- and the high ideals of Christian doctrine -- will be revealed. The Easter vigil proclaims, "O happy fault that gained for us so great a Redeemer!" It is the pilgrimage back to grace that is at the heart of the story.

So perhaps, instead of reading the Gospel of Judas as a literal narrative, it is best to consider it as an early marker in a long literary tradition. In the tumultuous early centuries after Christ, to grapple with the mysteries of the faith rather than claiming, as some today may be tempted to do, that Judas was the only way. Instead of clinging to a few sheets of tattered papyrus in hopes of absolving the problematic Judas, believers may be more likely to find a path out of despair and toward the redemption that Judas himself may have finally discovered.

David Gibson writes frequently about religion. His latest book is "The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle with the World."