

# **Judas – Traitor or Hero**

A Lesson about Evil

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Translated from German

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*Judas—Verräter oder Held: Ein Lehrstück  
über das Böse*

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Cover: sixth century AD mosaic of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, Sant'Appolinare Nuovo, Ravenna

# **Table of Contents**

Introduction 4

Judas in the Bible:

    Judas Iscariot in Matthew 7

    Judas Iscariot in Mark 14

    Judas Iscariot in Luke 19

    Judas Iscariot in John 22

    Judas in the Acts of the Apostles by  
    Luke 31

Lecture at the Frankfurt Book Fair  
2006: Judas Iscariot – Traitor or  
Hero? 34

Gospel of Judas 98

Bibliography 99

# **Introduction**

Repeatedly attempts have been made in the most varied ways to understand the nature and deed of Judas Iscariot. The interpretations range from Judas as traitor who had succumbed to evil to Judas as hero and initiate who even surpassed Jesus in readiness to sacrifice. His character and his deed raise the question of the nature and the meaning of evil in the world.

The here somewhat expanded text of the lecture given in 2006 at the Frankfurt Book Fair is a contribution to answering this question and to a better understanding of Jesus' student Judas. For the Judas principle is active in all times in every pupil on the spiritual path and can only be overcome when we clearly see through it. To enable readers to form their own opinions, the passages in the canonical gospels

pertaining to Judas are printed before the lecture. These along with the Gospel of Judas recently brought into public discussion being the texts with which the lecture deals. The English translation of the Gospel of Judas can be read online or in the books published by the National Geographic Society and April DeConick. See the bibliography after the lecture.

Munich, Autumn 2006

# **Judas in the Bible:**

## **Judas Iscariot in Matthew**

**Matthew 10:1–4**

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

<sup>2</sup>These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; <sup>3</sup>Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup>Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

**Matthew 26:6–11**

<sup>6</sup>Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, <sup>7</sup>a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it

on his head as he sat at the table.<sup>8</sup> But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? <sup>9</sup>For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” <sup>10</sup>But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. <sup>11</sup>For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.

### Matthew 26:14–16

<sup>14</sup>Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests <sup>15</sup>and said, “What will you give me if I betray him to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver. <sup>16</sup>And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

### Matthew 26:20–25

<sup>20</sup>When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; <sup>21</sup>and while they

were eating, he said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.’<sup>22</sup> And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’<sup>23</sup> He answered, ‘The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.<sup>24</sup> The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.’<sup>25</sup> Judas, who betrayed him, said, ‘Surely not I, Rabbi?’ He replied, ‘You have said so.’

Matthew 26:47–50, 56 (in the Garden of Gethsemane)

<sup>47</sup>While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.<sup>48</sup> Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.’<sup>49</sup> At

once he came up to Jesus and said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed him.

<sup>50</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Friend, do what you are here to do.’ Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.

<sup>56</sup>But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.’ Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

### Matthew 27:3–10

<sup>3</sup>When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. <sup>4</sup>He said, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ But they said, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself.’

<sup>5</sup>Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. <sup>6</sup>But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, ‘It is not lawful to put them into the

treasury, since they are blood money.’<sup>7</sup> After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter’s field as a place to bury foreigners.<sup>8</sup> For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.<sup>9</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price,<sup>10</sup> and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”

## **Judas Iscariot in Mark**

**Mark 3:14–19**

<sup>14</sup>And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, <sup>15</sup>and to have authority to cast out demons. <sup>16</sup>So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); <sup>17</sup>James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); <sup>18</sup>and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, <sup>19</sup>and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

**Mark 14:3–7**

<sup>3</sup>While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and

she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. <sup>4</sup>But some were there who said to one another in anger, ‘Why was the ointment wasted in this way? <sup>5</sup>For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.’ And they scolded her. <sup>6</sup>But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. <sup>7</sup>For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.

### Mark 14:10–11

<sup>10</sup>Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. <sup>11</sup>When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

## Mark 14:17–21

<sup>17</sup>When it was evening, he came with the twelve. <sup>18</sup>And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.’ <sup>19</sup>They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, ‘Surely, not I?’ <sup>20</sup>He said to them, ‘It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. <sup>21</sup>For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.’

## Mark 14:43–46 (in the Garden of Gethsemane)

<sup>43</sup>Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. <sup>44</sup>Now the betrayer had given

them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.’<sup>45</sup> So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, ‘Rabbi!’ and kissed him.<sup>46</sup> Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.

## Judas Iscariot in Luke

Luke 6:13–16

<sup>13</sup>And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: <sup>14</sup>Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, <sup>15</sup>and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, <sup>16</sup>and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Luke 22:3–6

<sup>3</sup>Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; <sup>4</sup>he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. <sup>5</sup>They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. <sup>6</sup>So he consented and began to look for an

opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present.

### Luke 22:14, 21–23

<sup>14</sup>When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him.

(And he spoke to them...) <sup>21</sup>“But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. <sup>22</sup>For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!” <sup>23</sup>Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this.

### Luke 22:47–48 (in the Garden of Gethsemane)

<sup>47</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; <sup>48</sup>but Jesus said to him,

“Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?”

## **Judas Iscariot in John**

**John 6:63–64**

<sup>63</sup>It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup>But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.

**John 6:66–71**

<sup>66</sup>Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. <sup>67</sup>So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ <sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup>We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’ <sup>70</sup>Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.’ <sup>71</sup>He

was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

### John 12:1–8

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’

John 13:1–5, 10–11, 15–18, 21–30

<sup>1</sup>Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup>The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper <sup>3</sup>Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, <sup>4</sup>got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup>Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

<sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.’

<sup>11</sup>For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, ‘Not all of you are clean.’

<sup>15</sup>For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup>Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup>If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. <sup>18</sup>I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, “The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.”

<sup>21</sup>After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, ‘Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.’ <sup>22</sup>The

disciples looked at one another,  
uncertain of whom he was speaking.

<sup>23</sup>One of his disciples—the one whom  
Jesus loved—was reclining next to him;

<sup>24</sup>Simon Peter therefore motioned to  
him to ask Jesus of whom he was  
speaking. <sup>25</sup>So while reclining next to  
Jesus, he asked him, ‘Lord, who is it?’

<sup>26</sup>Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to  
whom I give this piece of bread when I  
have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he  
had dipped the piece of bread, he gave  
it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.

<sup>27</sup>After he received the piece of bread,  
Satan entered into him. Jesus said to  
him, ‘Do quickly what you are going to  
do.’ <sup>28</sup>Now no one at the table knew  
why he said this to him. <sup>29</sup>Some  
thought that, because Judas had the  
common purse, Jesus was telling him,  
‘Buy what we need for the festival’; or,  
that he should give something to the  
poor. <sup>30</sup>So, after receiving the piece of

bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

### John 17:12

<sup>12</sup>While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

### John 18:1–6

<sup>1</sup>After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. <sup>2</sup>Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. <sup>3</sup>So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

<sup>4</sup>Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, ‘For whom are you looking?’ <sup>5</sup>They answered, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus replied, ‘I am he.’ Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus said to them, ‘I am he’, they stepped back and fell to the ground.

## **Judas in the Acts of the Apostles by Luke**

**Acts 1:15–26**

<sup>15</sup>In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, <sup>16</sup>‘Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— <sup>17</sup>for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.’

<sup>18</sup>(Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.

<sup>19</sup>This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)  
<sup>20</sup>‘For it is written in the book of

Psalms,

“Let his homestead become desolate,  
and let there be no one to live in it”;  
and

“Let another take his position of  
overseer.”

<sup>21</sup>So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup>beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.’ <sup>23</sup>So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup>Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup>to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ <sup>26</sup>And they cast lots for

them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

# **Lecture at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2006:**

## **Judas Iscariot – Traitor or Hero?**

The discussion about the figure of Judas has flared up anew since recently a Gospel of Judas was found that in some respects makes other statements than those in the canonical gospels known to us. As I have described the spiritual path of Christianity in two books by means of the gospels, I want to explore here the role of Judas on this path and for those on this path.

First the facts in the gospels, which you surely still remember. Judas was a pupil of Jesus, one of the Twelve. The community of Jesus and his pupils was a spiritual school of that time—today we would say an ashram—in which a

master walked a spiritual path with his pupils. In contemporary Christianity, this fact is as good as forgotten.

Contemporary Christianity is just a belief in a redeemer who about 2000 years ago supposedly redeemed all who believe in him through his death on the cross and his resurrection. But in original Christianity, a path of experience was walked on which the potential spiritual man present in everyone, an embryonic spiritual principle, was developed and made conscious. The canonical gospels describe this path in an exemplary way. It can be walked in all times, including today.

On this path a new man is to resurrect from the spiritual principle in the heart: an enlightened consciousness and being that lives only from divine wisdom, love, and intelligence. For this to happen the pupil must recognize all inner

tendencies to earthly power, honor, wealth, and happiness and let them slowly “die”—must “crucify” them as Paul says. This is the way that was and still is walked in all times of the history of humanity and in all cultures. It received its special expression in Christianity corresponding to the state of development of humanity at that time.

Jesus and his pupils thus formed a spiritual school. Judas, like the other eleven, was supposed to learn to lose *his* life, his earthly hopes for power, honor, wealth, and happiness, for the sake of the spiritual man and thus to save his true, divine, eternal life (Mark 8:35). His example shows especially clearly what difficulties this task of the spiritual path brings. Learning from Jesus for years like the other eleven, Judas also developed the spiritual man in his own being. He tried to allow his

urge for self-fulfillment in the earthly world to gradually “die.” When push came to shove and his earthly life was threatened, however, this urge appeared with terrible intensity, overthrew all previous insights of the spiritual pupil, and took a hold of Judas again.

Judas appears for the first time in the gospels in a story in which a woman anoints Jesus with precious ointment. Judas objects: What a waste! The ointment could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor! (Mark 14:3-5. In this connection Judas is named only in the parallel story in John.) We see that Judas is not an evil person. On the contrary he has a heart for the poor. He believes his spiritual community exists primarily to render acts of mercy to the poor and weak. (When it says in the parallel story in John that Judas as treasurer only made

this suggestion in order to steal from the newly filled coffer, exact textual analysis has shown that this can only be a later addition.)

But Jesus corrects him. Judas has not yet fully realized that the highest inherent aim of the human being is the spiritual life, not social security. Human beings should give their highest love forces, symbolized in the story by the precious ointment, to the spiritual man, embodied through Jesus, not for the happiness of the earthly human being.

Judas wants to sell the ointment, however. He wants to change the function of the highest human love forces so that they serve social welfare. He still vacillates between two goals: either to construct the kingdom of God in his own being on the spiritual path or to construct a human kingdom on earth. Jesus says, however: Although

social engagement is important, it is not the most important. You should not forget the real inherent aim of the human being. You should love me, the spiritual man who also embodies the spiritual man in you, with all your power. This is the most important. This results in social engagement as a secondary effect.

The second time Judas appears in the gospels is in a highly precarious situation. Jesus is in Jerusalem before the feast of Passover. He and his pupils know that the spiritual leaders of the Jews—the high priests and theologians—want to eliminate him. Jesus as spiritual teacher questions the dogmas on which their power over the faithful and the privileges arising from this are based. They cannot possibly tolerate such a person any longer. They also fear that Jesus could instigate a revolt

that would be violently crushed by the Romans.

Judas also recognizes that Jesus and he himself as pupil of the master are in mortal danger. In this situation he rejects the spiritual path and his master, the embodiment of the spiritual man. If he would remain faithful to him, he would also be condemned to death. His whole will to live rebels against its destruction. The essence of the spiritual path is: Earthly existence dissolves in the spiritual. But in Judas this earthly existence, the will to live, is stronger than his spiritual longing.

In his fear of death, he hands over Jesus, the embodiment of his own spiritual goal, to the earthly powers. He wants to prove thereby that he is serious with his break. He wants to be beyond any suspicion and demonstrate his new loyalty.

In John and Luke is written: “Satan entered into him.” At the Last Supper, Jesus had passed a piece of bread to Judas. The piece of bread is symbolic for the “flesh” of Jesus, for the spiritual substance and power of Jesus. The master had thus given his spiritual forces to Judas in a special way. But just when new spiritual forces become active in someone, egocentricity, Satan in him, is especially provoked. This Satan becomes outraged against these forces because he fears to be deprived of his power. For this reason, a passage from the Old Testament is quoted in John in connection with the Last Supper and the foot washing: “The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.” The feet are symbolic of the human will. The earthly will to power rebels against spiritual love.

Added to this was that Judas would have been in mortal danger if he had remained faithful to his spiritual path.

In this situation the will to live, Satan in him, rebelled with full intensity against the spiritual path and the spiritual master. “Satan entered into him.”

You know what followed. Judas, who knew well Jesus’ habits, leads members of the temple guard and Roman soldiers to Gethsemane where Jesus was and showed them through a kiss whom they should arrest. In Matthew it also says that Judas repented his deed shortly thereafter: “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” and that he hanged himself.

The Acts of the Apostles tell that Judas “acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness,” that “his homestead became desolate,” and that he “burst open in the middle.” This has to be understood pictorially. Through his betrayal, Judas acquired an inner state of complete desolation. Whoever repeatedly receives spiritual forces on

the spiritual path and allows them to change his nature— whoever already predominately lives out of the divine world—and then lets himself be captured again by the earthly world gets into a state of complete mental desolation. He is psychically torn between two opposing tendencies and “bursts open in the middle.”

After looking at these facts, we are already in the midst of the question of Judas’ motives. The gospels give a very clear answer. The pupil on the spiritual path always stands between two tendencies: Out of the inner spiritual principle, he develops the spiritual man who is pure love, devotion, and kindness. On the other hand, to make this possible he has to gradually dissolve his earthly being, his drive to self-maintenance, power, glory, and wealth. He has to let go of all hopes of making a paradise out of the earthly

world in which he perhaps plays a leading role.

At a crisis point in Judas' development, the one tendency gained again the upper hand over the other. Satan, the personification of the will to power, entered into him when Judas received special spiritual powers from Jesus at the Last Supper. It was at the same time a moment when this will to power felt itself mortally threatened. Such a point of crisis always comes on the spiritual path: The old will to power has to completely abdicate sometime, if the new spiritual man is to arise.

This applies to all pupils, not only Judas. All pupils—only not in the Gospel of John—ask Jesus when he says a betrayer is among them: Lord, is it I? They know that they cannot vouch for themselves and that Satan is in each of them. Just when the spiritual power works most strongly in them, Satan unfolds his greatest power and the

greatest resistance against being deprived of his power. Only by the pupil clearly recognizing this Satan and rejecting him in the spiritual power can the pupil finally overcome him.

Judas did not accomplish this task, however. Satan entered into him, overpowered him, forced him to betray his previous goal, the unfolding of the spiritual man in his own being, and consequently also hands over Jesus, the visible embodiment of this spiritual man, to the earthly powers. This is the innermost motivation of Judas according to the canonical gospels. Is it not conclusive? When it then also says, for example in Matthew, that he did it for money, then this is only a side motive subordinated to the main motive.

One has to understand that a spiritual path is depicted in the canonical

gospels and that Judas as Jesus' pupil also goes this path. Taking this for granted, his motivation is understandable. If one does not take this for granted, one cannot understand Judas. For this reason many interpreters who no longer understood the character of the gospels sought for other explanations. One was presented for example by Klopstock in his *Messias* and taken up again in the present by Luise Rinser in her novel *Mirjam*.

According to this explanation Judas hoped since being acquainted with Jesus that the latter wanted to establish a paradise on earth, a kingdom of David, a realm of freedom from the Roman yoke. Although Jesus repeatedly explained that his kingdom is not of this world, the theory is that Judas stubbornly clung to this hope. He is supposed to have been a Zealot, zealous for a political messiah, and

believed that Jesus only pretended to be powerless in order to then strike with greater surprise.

In order to find out for certain what Jesus' true intentions were, Judas wanted to provoke Jesus by his betrayal. If Jesus were the political messiah as Judas hoped, then Jesus would come forth at the moment of danger and proclaim himself as king of the Jews. If he were not, then Judas would at least finally know.

Is this theory believable? It is not if one takes seriously the motivation explained above. For then Judas as spiritual pupil who attached himself to a spiritual teacher *knew* exactly and from the start the goal Jesus and his community of pupils were striving towards: a spiritual development of his pupils and of humanity, on no account political power or social reform.

Thus speculations that he wanted to force Jesus through his betrayal to reveal his political messianic dignity are frail. Judas *knew* that Jesus was a spiritual messiah, and he betrayed him because he could no longer accept the goal of this spiritual messiah, which furthermore brought him into mortal danger.

With this we come to a highly problematic aspect of the Judas theme: the question of the meaning of the betrayal. Judas himself will also be judged according to how this question is answered.

In most Christian churches, God has a “plan of salvation” for human beings similar to human plans. He is angry with them because of their sins. Death and the troubles of life are the result of this anger. In the long run people would be lost if God, who is not only

just but also merciful, did not send his Son. As an innocent, the Son takes the wrath of God towards the guilty upon himself as a substitute, lets himself be killed, but then, through the power of God overcomes death, and resurrects. Thereby God's justice is satisfied, and God's mercy can become active. God can now not only forgive people if they believe in him and his deeds of salvation but even resurrect them on the Day of Judgment to eternal, blissful life.

Some say that without Judas, redemption would not have been possible. If Judas had not betrayed the Son of God, then Jesus would not have been killed and as a result could not have resurrected and accomplished his work of redemption. According to this theory Judas had thus a necessary function in the plan of redemption.

Without him it would not have worked, and therefore he is not guilty.

This is not an official theory of the Church. Most Christians see no contradiction between their belief in God’s “plan of salvation” in which Judas plays a necessary role and the condemnation of Judas as a great wrongdoer. They let the riddle rest. Judas has heaped guilt upon himself; this is certain to them. The will of God is unfathomable. It is the more unfathomable in that Jesus, the Son of God, *knows* that Judas will betray him. “For he knew who was to betray him,” it says in John (13:11). And still Jesus does not prevent the betrayal! He does not thwart God’s “plan of salvation” in order to make possible the planned redemption—but at the cost of poor Judas. Even Jesus, the merciful, apparently uses Judas as an instrument

and allows that one of his pupils becomes guilty!

In this connection there is a strange remark by Jesus in the synoptic gospels. “For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!”

(Luke 22:22) This is generally interpreted as follows: Someone *has to* betray the Son of Man. This is determined in the course of things. Only thus can God’s plan of salvation be fulfilled. One *has to* become guilty; all others are lucky.

But one can ask is such luck at the cost of one unlucky person legitimate? And if Judas *has to* become guilty, can one still speak of guilt? One speaks of guilt when someone makes a free decision to commit evil, that is, is really responsible for it. But if one person, Judas, *has to* commit the betrayal, one can no longer speak of a free decision and responsibility. Why then does

Jesus say: Woe to that one who betrays him? The sentence acts like a koan, logically insoluble.

One gets into such difficulties if one insinuates that God has a plan of salvation that is like a human plan and that he carries out by means of certain people. But God does not intend anything. God does not use people as means to an end. God realizes himself. He realizes himself *in* his Son and in all people who follow the Son. Jesus, the light, steps as the power of love into the world. This is his *essence*. He unavoidably calls up resistance because the darkness fights against the light. And he allows this resistance and allows himself to be betrayed.

Just as when ordinary light strikes hard objects, they cast shadows if they are opaque and resist the light. This is unavoidable. In the same way the spiritual light of Jesus strikes Judas,

and Judas unavoidably casts a shadow because Satan in him fights the light.

Thus the Son of Man passes as determined by his own nature, not by a higher authority with a plan of salvation, and all those who resist this power of love will experience pain. They will be broken up by the stream of love in which they should actually flow along. “Woe to that one!”

But if one comes from the view of a “plan of salvation” by God, one will be forced to ask further: Would Judas, for years a pupil of the Son of God, not have been initiated into the plan of salvation and have consciously taken his part in it? That is, would he have committed the betrayal in arrangement with Jesus in order to make possible the plan of salvation? This is the theory that fascinates many.

If Judas had committed the betrayal in agreement with Jesus, then he would be a great hero, an even greater hero than Jesus. Jesus accepted death but knew that people would honor him and be grateful to him for centuries. Judas, however, agreed to commit the betrayal even though he knew that he would be despised through the centuries and branded as the greatest traitor of all times. Seen in this way his sacrifice would have been greater than the Son of God's, his heroism still greater, and there would be no question of guilt. Judas took on the dirty work, so to say, and even allowed himself to be insulted for it so that Jesus' light could shine the brighter.

The Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis, for example, was an adherent of this theory. In his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, he wrote: "Jesus gave Judas a sign to come to him. 'Forgive me, my brother

Judas,' Jesus said, 'but it is necessary.' 'Rabbi, is there no other way?' 'No, my brother Judas... I have to be killed, and you must betray me. We two must save the world. Help me!"'

If events are presented in such a way, it does not make sense anymore to speak of betrayal. Since he wanted to fulfill the plan of salvation, Judas would have been especially faithful to God, his master Jesus, and his spiritual goal. As participant in the plan of salvation and Jesus' helper, he would not have betrayed Jesus!

But why did Judas commit suicide then? I can find no reason for it, if Judas voluntarily cooperated with the betrayal. The Gospel of Matthew speaks of remorse. This would then be invalid. I think one should take the gospels really seriously as sources. The strongest objection is: If it had been a case of an agreement between Jesus and Judas, it would have been a rigged

game. They both would have acted out a sham play for the public and later centuries. They would have set a hard, merciless reality in motion, which was not really so. What a fraud! No, this theory of the conscious agreement of Judas is not tenable. It leads to absurd results when followed through to its logical conclusion.

This theory as well starts with false premises. It is not that God carries out a plan of salvation with the help of his Son. God does not have *purposes* like human beings have and does not use us as means to an end. God does not intend anything. God realizes himself. The gospels do not depict a plan of salvation set in motion 2000 years ago by God that has beneficent results still today.

No, God realizes himself in his Son. A divine being incarnates voluntarily: The “Word” became flesh drawn by

love for his “own” as it is expressed in the Gospel of John. It is the *nature* of the Son of God to give his life in love for his “own.” He has no intentions and does not plan anything. He realizes himself by becoming flesh. He is light, and the light shines lawfully without intention into the darkness. It strikes opaque subjects that cast shadows and subjects that become pervious to the light and allow themselves to be illuminated.

In the same way, some people become Jesus’ pupils, walk a spiritual path, and thus reach illumination, redemption, liberation from transience and death. The Son of God lives this path as an example for them and thereby enables them to go the same path leading to the resurrection of the spiritual man in the realm of his father. God realizes himself in Jesus and his followers. Others on the contrary cast

shadows and betray the light. God does not realize himself in them—not yet.

The human being and humanity are not redeemed by an act of grace; they are not redeemed through Jesus' physical death on the cross and his resurrection. They are redeemed thereby that the voluntarily incarnated Jesus voluntarily dies the mystery death already *before* his physical crucifixion. He lets his old, earthly, egocentric nature be “crucified” on the spiritual path so that a new self with an immortal spirit body can resurrect. His pupils can then walk in his tracks and voluntarily die the mystery death as well in order to resurrect with a new soul and a new spirit body. Jesus creates the possibility for redemption. Whoever does not take up this possibility is not redeemed.

This does not require a betrayer. The light needs no shadow in order to act. But in every pupil on the spiritual path, a shadow, a Judas, appears with certainty. For Satan in the human being fights back. The human ego, its presumptuousness, its drive for self-maintenance, and its will to power fight against the mystery death, the voluntary crucifixion of egocentricity. Satan in the human being wants to prevent the redemption of the spiritual man. People betray their spiritual goal when in the moment of danger, Satan in them becomes stronger than their longing for spiritual liberation.

Jesus knows of this lawfulness. And he allows it to occur. He does not expel Judas from his community of pupils until the fronts are clearly defined. He allows that the necessary spiritual fights occur in all of his pupils. He leaves everyone the choice to remain faithful to the spiritual path or to

betray it. Every pupil on the spiritual path must have this freedom of decision.

Once Judas has decided, however, Jesus sends him away from the community of pupils: “What you want to do, do soon!” (John 13:27) Now Judas has no longer any business in the spiritual community. The community is cleansed thereby. The evil that secretly smoldered in its midst has revealed itself, could be recognized and sent away.

When Jesus is then handed over to his enemies by the betrayal and killed, then this has no further significance for the spiritual path of his pupils and for the path in general that he brought into the world. After all, he had anchored this path in the community of pupils and seen to it that this possibility of liberation could be continued through the centuries for all time. In this

respect Jesus could also have died peacefully in bed. The path of liberation would nevertheless have been anchored in humanity.

Nonetheless, the betrayal of Judas and Jesus being handed over and killed have consequences for Judas himself as well as for the development of humanity. Judas experiences the results of his betrayal—the inner desolation and despair, the complete emptiness—and can become conscious, in this or in a future life, of how trivial is the transitory, the satanic, the evil in human beings for which he betrayed the eternal. He can in a later life fight with greater power against the temptations of Satan in his own being and more consciously go his path.

What are the consequences of the betrayal for humanity? The enemies of the spiritual path kill Jesus. Thereby they impregnate themselves

irrevocably with the spiritual truth embodied by Jesus. They are now indissolubly linked with this truth. It sits in them like a thorn in the flesh. Sometime it will break into their consciousness and cause them to go a spiritual path. The truth will be victorious in them also. In this way God turns evil into good in the end.

The betrayal of Judas raises the question of the meaning or even the function of evil in the world. Through the betrayal, that is, something evil, apparently something good arises in Judas after all—realization—and realization arises in the long run also in the enemies of the spiritual path.

Although good can arise out of evil or because God turns evil to the good—does evil become good thereby? This is a wrong conclusion that one meets with often. Evil has good results. Thus, one

concludes, it is after all something good, even necessary in the great scheme of things. But the light does not need the shadow; it is not necessary for the light. When one says that evil is necessary, one plays it down. This view does not do justice to the evilness of evil; it even promotes it. Instead one should say: Evil exists and has its consequences. These consequences are turned by the divine world to the good at some time, but thereby evil itself does not become good.

When the betrayer, Judas, experiences the consequences of his evil deed, he can notice the nature of evil. He learns that the evil is really evil, and that he learns this is something good. But his evil deed does not become good thereby. On the contrary: Only because and when he recognizes that and how it was evil can something good—his insight into the nature of evil—result

from it. He has to recognize evil as being really evil. Only then can something good come of it. Otherwise the matter is watered down.

One also often hears that Judas had to build a bridge between the Son of God and the earthly powers through his betrayal. Without this bridge they would not have been able to capture and kill Jesus and so would also not have been impregnated with the truth. Thus the betrayal of Judas had something good in it and even was necessary in order to confront also the enemies of the Son of God with the divine.

But was the betrayal really necessary in order to impregnate the enemies of the divine with the divine? The incarnation of Jesus in the earthly world, his effectiveness, and his teachings were the bridge between the divine and the earthly world. They

worked strongly enough to also reach his enemies. The reactions of the high priests and theologians prove this because they were irritated to the utmost by Jesus' effectiveness and saw their positions threatened.

But when the betrayal happened because Satan in the betrayer became overpowering, in fact an additional though unnecessary bridge was built. For the divine world turned the betrayal to the good by confronting the enemies of the spiritual man more intensely with the truth. Jesus foresaw this chain of events and consented to it. The betrayal was not stage-managed by God and Jesus as a means to an end. The betrayal happened without the intentions of God and Jesus, and the killing of Jesus by his enemies also happened without God having intended it. Jesus agreed to it and let himself be sacrificed. The innocent

allowed himself to be sacrificed. He turned this evil deed of humanity to the good by working as truth also within his enemies.

If one takes Judas as the tendency to betrayal in everyone and above all in every pupil on the spiritual path, then one has to say: This tendency will unavoidably be realized in the pupil as long as he is insufficiently conscious of the nature of evil within his own being. Jesus, the spiritual man, is then betrayed and killed in this pupil. And thereby this pupil will the more intensely remain chained to the truth that he has killed in himself. It will someday break up his malice and also lead him to the spiritual path or lead him back to it. In this case the betrayal is also unnecessary for redemption. When it nevertheless occurs, however, it will be turned to the good by God.

What is necessary on the spiritual path, however, is that the pupil at some

time recognizes the tendency of betrayal in his own being and says within himself as Jesus said to Judas: “Do quickly what you are going to.” He must recognize and let go of the evil within himself. He must allow that the Judas principle is revealed in his own being. Then he has to let it go and “send it away.”

This means: The two tendencies in the pupil, the spiritual and the earthly, which up to this critical point were active in him in a mixed way, are now separated. The pupil perceives his egocentricity, lets it go, and leaves it to itself.

If it continues to maintain itself, as it did in Judas, it will gain the upper hand over the spiritual forces in the pupil, over “Jesus.” It will betray “Jesus” and mobilize all earthly powers against him. The spiritual forces in the pupil are “killed,” that is, driven out and made ineffective.

Thereby the process that began in all of humanity with the killing of Jesus starts also in the individual: The ousted spiritual forces continue to work in the murderer as conscience until they one day break up the evil and make their enemy, Saul, into their proponent, Paul. The betrayal in the individual pupil is not unavoidable and not necessary. If it happens, however, it is still turned to the good by the divine world.

Still a few words about the Gospel of Judas, which recently surfaced. Does it contain new points of view? It is conspicuous how Jesus' pupils with the exception of Judas are characterized. In a vision of the future, they see themselves as corrupt priests who do nothing other than seduce others into a false faith and make them rebel against the actual inherent aim of humanity. They serve the god of this earthly world

who does not want to permit that people free themselves from his realm of power.

Thereby the view of some Gnostics towards the early Church comes to expression (the Gospel of Judas was probably composed around 150 AD). One cannot conclude from this that the authors of this gospel, a full century after the events, had better information about Judas than the authors of the canonical gospels and therewith carried out a necessary correction of the picture of Judas. Due to their special religious view, they have only put Judas in a light that does not necessarily have anything to do with reality.

In this text, Judas is receptive to special realization and open to inner, spiritual development. He is able to “stand” before Jesus while the other pupils are not. But he can also “not

look him in the eyes." Because of his special qualities, Jesus tells him the secrets of the creation and development of the world. His special intellectual and spiritual qualities also make Judas especially receptive to the energies of evil, however. Thus he betrays Jesus to the high priests.

The end shows that in the long run all pupils are saved, including those who have become corrupt priests and above all, Judas. He will enter as the others do into the realm of the spirit. But because of his special energies of evil, he will have to go through tremendous suffering before this. This is the testimony of this gospel. The pupil with special possibilities for realization also has special possibilities for evil and because of this he has to especially suffer. Nevertheless he will also be saved and enter into the realm of the spirit.

I find nothing in this gospel that could indicate that according to its authors Judas consciously or in agreement with Jesus betrayed him to make a plan of salvation by God possible. The modern publishers of this text, however, again advocate this hypothesis. They base themselves in this on two short sentences in the text. Jesus says to Judas: “But you will exceed all of them.<sup>1</sup> For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”

The publishers interpret Judas surpassing all other pupils as Jesus regarding Judas as a specially chosen instrument in God’s plan of salvation. But nothing in the rest of the text confirms this possibility. Judas surpasses the other pupils, who are presented as corrupt priests, simply in

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<sup>1</sup> April DeConick translates here, “Yet you will do worse than all of them.”

intelligence, capacity to realization, and one could say the resulting criminal energy.<sup>2</sup> When it says, “you will sacrifice the man that clothes me,” then one certainly cannot conclude from this that Judas consciously sacrificed Jesus’ physical body, the garment of the spiritual Jesus, so that the true, spiritual man Jesus would be liberated and could enter the divine realm. No, in accordance with gnostic ways of thought, the sentence means to say: Judas was able to sacrifice *only* Jesus’ physical body. He could not thereby touch Jesus’ true, spiritual essence.

Thus what is special in this gospel is that Judas surpasses all other pupils in realization and in evil and that the other pupils are typical non-Gnostics, ordinary church Christians. This gospel

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<sup>2</sup> Konrad Dietzfelbinger had as basis of his interpretation the translation published by the National Geographic Society. The translation of April DeConick confirms his interpretation, for in her translation, Jesus says to Judas, “Yet you will do worse than all of them.”

is thereby not typical for the spiritual gnosis of that time. It could stem from a side branch of the gnosis that was already marked by hatred towards the early Church and wanted to reverse all standards of this church. What was especially good there—Peter, the great apostle, and Jesus' other faithful pupils—is here devalued as dogmatic Christianity, which has already surrendered to the earthly world of darkness. And what was especially bad in the Church, Judas, is revalued as belonging to the spiritual world of light. Judas is characterized as a Gnostic and therefore really belongs to the world of light. But in contrast with Jesus, he embodies the negative side of the gnosis, the shadow of the light. He uses his special spiritual gifts for evil. For this he has to especially suffer but is saved in the end through realization.

The Gospel of Judas yields the same result for the spiritual path as the canonical gospels. A tendency becomes noticeable in Judas that appears in every pupil on the spiritual path. One can learn from Judas that such a satanic tendency also sits in oneself and that it can especially appear in critical moments. From Jesus, whom Judas betrays, one can learn how to deal with this tendency to betrayal. Jesus says in Gethsemane: Not my will but your will be done. This is the formula by which self-will, the satanic in the human being, can dissolve in the divine will.

If the Judas tendency is still too powerful in the pupil, however, and wants to live itself out, then Jesus shows how to deal with this also. It must not be suppressed. It must be allowed before the consciousness so that it can be revealed and recognized. But then it must be “sent out.” And

then it still has the freedom to betray the Jesus principle in the pupil or not. In some pupils, however, it commits the betrayal.

And the spiritual man allows himself to be betrayed, handed over, and killed because it is his nature not to answer violence with violence. But thereby that the Judas tendency does its work, it destroys itself and also draws the earthly powers opposed to the spiritual man in a most intensive way into the process of redemption. The killed spiritual man resurrects in the long run also in them.

With Jesus, the spiritual path that was and is walked in all times was raised to a new level of consciousness. The human being, the pupil, can now go this path as an understanding, conscious, and self-responsible individual. To this corresponds also a new consciousness and intensity of the

Judas principle in the pupil. It has to be experienced, recognized, and overcome in full consciousness on the spiritual path. God and Satan embodied in Jesus and Judas are active in the pupil. He has to choose in clear, full consciousness between the two powers.

There remains the question of why repeatedly people had and have the wish to put Judas in a more positive light than the canonical gospels do.

One reason is surely that many could not and did not want bear that Judas would be damned for all eternity. In the middle ages he was hated and despised as the greatest betrayer and evil-doer of all times who was burdened with a terrible debt. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he suffered in the iciest hell stuck in Lucifer's throat, and in *The Golden Legend*, a beloved medieval collection of legends, he had

like Cain murdered his brother and like Oedipus violated his mother and murdered his father.

In the twentieth century, people were no longer as ready to condemn others perhaps because they felt that a betrayer of the holiest lurked in them all. They knew that under extreme conditions everyone could become guilty. But should this compassion lead to the idea that one no longer takes seriously the real guilt of Judas—or if one rejects the concept of “guilt,” should the evil in Judas be understood as indignation against the spiritual world? Moreover it is possible that after much suffering in later incarnations, Judas was nevertheless redeemed, although he had been burdened with greatest guilt as told in the gospels. The Gospel of Judas attaches importance to this conclusion.

Perhaps the other, more effective reason for a positive interpretation of

the figure of Judas, however, is that many secretly identify with him. He, Jesus' pupil from the start who like all others was given abundant spiritual forces by the master, has to somehow be a participant in process of redemption! Would not everyone who was and is Jesus' pupil want to help the master in his work of salvation even with the greatest sacrifices? Everyone wants, after all, the very best for his fellow human beings and surely also Judas!

However, exactly in this, "I want the very best for my fellow human beings," can be the betrayal. Judas wanted to *bring about* the redemption. He wanted to manipulate the events. This is what the above positive Judas interpretations bring to expression. He wanted to provoke Jesus to finally declare himself as messiah, or he wanted to be an important link in the chain of events of redemption. Who

would not want this? It is this wish that probably secretly lurks behind the idealization of Judas as a heroic activist.

Exactly therein, however, the nature of betrayal is shown again. We as earthly human beings want to bring about the redemption and take things into our own hands. We have goals and use others as means to an end. Thereby we betray the divine being outside of us and in us. The divine being does not want anything other than to reveal and realize itself through us. When it is redeemed through the mystery death in us, then it can also redeem others. It then consciously contributes to the unfolding of God without us earthly human beings interfering with our own desires, claims to power, and best intentions.

Our manipulating tendencies are dissolved on the spiritual path.

Redemption consists of this: The spiritual forces in us, embodied through Jesus, recognize the tendencies to betrayal and to manipulation, embodied through Judas, send them out, thus separate themselves from them, and allow themselves to be betrayed and killed. Through this sacrifice of love, they also redeem in the long run the indignant and manipulative forces.

Instead of doing, loving. “Love does not rule but it moulds, and that is greater,” says the old man in Goethe’s *Fairytales*.

## **The Gospel of Judas**

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The quotes from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version.