



The Gospel of Judas

1. The passing down

A manuscript was found in 1976 written in Coptic, a recent phase of ancient Egyptian, and probably identical to the Gospel of Judas known in the old church.

A Gospel according to Judas is first attested by Irenäus, a teacher of theology, around 180 AD, so that one assumes that it was written around 150 AD. A further reference to this gospel is to be found with Epiphanius of Salamis (374/77 AD), an early Christian writer who refers to a Gospel according to Judas in his examination of false doctrines.

The text of the Gospel according to Judas was passed down with three other apocryphal scripts ("Letter of Peter to Philip"¹ and an "Apocalypse of James"² as well as a script called the "Book of Allogenes") in a papyrus codex bound in leather. This codex was probably produced in the 4th or 5th century. The Coptic translation probably originates from the 3rd or 4th century.

The codex was kept under lock and key for a long time for commercial reasons, so that a translation could only be made in 2006. About 80% of the text could be saved during restoration of the handwriting, and therefore also translated.

¹ The Gnostic text can be found in Schneemelcher, Wilhem (Hrsg.): Neutestamentliche Apokryphen. I: Evangelien. 6. Aufl. Tübingen 1990, S.280–284.

² Coptic-Gnostic apocalypses of Paul and Peter exist in addition.

2. The content of the Gospel of Judas

(Quoted text based on translation from Coptic by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, in collaboration with François Gaudard.)

The Gospel of Judas declares itself as the "revelation" that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot "three days before He celebrated Passover". It mainly includes dialogs between Jesus and His disciples or Jesus and Judas. The styles known from the canonical gospels (parables, miracles etc.) are not encountered in this text.

Only Judas understands Jesus, while the other disciples only showed a lack of understanding. Therefore Jesus also explains to him the "Mysteries beyond the world".

A focal point in the Gospel of Judas is cosmology. Jesus says to Judas "[Come], that I may teach you about [secrets] no person [has] ever seen." The theory of the creation according to the Gospel of Judas is completely oriented on the creation myths of the gnosis, according to which lower powers (Archons) created the material world.

According to Judas, the fall of Adam into sin is also reinterpreted: "But God caused knowledge to be [given] to Adam and those with him, so that the kings of chaos and the underworld might not lord it over them."

The significance of Judas is emphasized by Jesus in the following words: "You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations – and you will come to rule over them."

Following the communication of secret knowledge – this is also a Gnostic motive – Judas learns of an apotheosis which reminds us of Christ's ascension: "Judas lifted

up his eyes and saw the luminous cloud, and he entered it. Those standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud, saying, [...] great generation [...]."

It is insinuated that Judas' betrayal is a great deed in the history of salvation: "But you will exceed all of them", Jesus says to him.

3. The theological relevance

Concepts and ideas in the Gospel of Judas belong in the context of the gnosis, i.e. that large ancient spiritual movement in which Christian ideas were linked with those of ancient religion and philosophy. The gnosis promised salvation through knowledge and taught a radical dualism of spirit and material, of good and evil, of the Old Testament God and the unknown God who reveals Himself through Jesus.

The positive viewpoint of Judas also belongs in the context of Gnostic ideas. It is to be found more or less in a group of Gnostics called Cainites. It is typical for them to see the negative figures of the Old Testament as positive. A similar view was held by the Gnostic Marcion, who gained effectiveness in the 2nd century – especially in Asia Minor – and even created his own ecclesiastical organization. Marcion taught "Christ only went down into the underworld to redeem Cain and Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Esau and all the nations who did not recognize the God of the Jews, whereas Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham etc. – since they served the Creator and His law and disregarded the true God – were left behind" (Jonas, Hans: Gnosis. Die Botschaft des fremden Gottes. 2. Aufl. Frankfurt/M. 2000, S.126).

In this respect the Gospel of Judas provides a further insight into the train of thought of Gnostic groups, who as it were saw their task in the reversal of values.

However, it should be emphasized that the Gospel of Judas does not contain any true passing downs of Jesus. These are mainly included in the four canonical gospels which originated between 70 and 90 AD.

Like the other Gnostic gospel scripts, the Gospel of Judas also has no interest in history or in the historical figure of Jesus. It is only concerned with development of the fundamental Gnostic ideas concerning the origin of the cosmos, salvation through knowledge and debasement of the Old Testament God.

Already in the books of the New Testament – especially John's works should be mentioned here – there are significant elements combating the gnosis (cf. 1 John 1). The 1st Epistle of John attacks the denial of Jesus Christ as a real human, for the Gnostics claim that Jesus only had a phantom body. The gnosis proclaimed in everything (theory of the creation, doctrine of redemption, Christology, Eschatology) a gospel different from that of the apostles and their scholars. Justifiably, none of their scripts were incorporated into the New Testament canons.