

Judas' Betrayal in the Earliest Church

There is at least one thing all can agree on about the 2nd century gnostic *Gospel of Judas*. It definitely portrays Judas as a good man, a no-'the' truly spiritual apostle. The positive picture painted of Judas as 'the obedient disciple who only followed Jesus' instructions when he turned him over to the priests', radically differs from the tale that was told by the primitive Jerusalem church.

According to the book of Acts (chapter 1), between Jesus' Ascension (40 days after his resurrection) and the Day of Pentecost (some 10 days later), a striking and important event occurred in the embryonic Jerusalem church. The remaining eleven disciples met, prayed and cast lots in order to secure a divinely approved successor for their traitorous brother, the apostle Judas.

Although Luke-Acts was not written until the mid 60's A.D. (still 100 years before the *Gospel of Judas*), we find much in this tradition (story) recounted by Dr. Luke in chapter 1 pointing to a provenance (origin) within the environs of Jerusalem in the early 30's. First, the obvious pragmatic necessity of replacing Judas with another Jesus follower with apostolic credentials to complete the 12 attests to the historical antiquity of the story and its rationale. Further, the Aramaic reference to the field the priests purchased with Judas's blood money as *Akel Dama* or 'Field of Blood' inscribes a designation of Judas' field by the early first century Jerusalem community, using the spoken tongue of its citizenry. Thus, in order to record the Aramaic name, Luke must translate the earlier term for the benefit of his letter's later Greek-speaking recipients.

This remarkable text gives us unique insight into how Judas was seen by the other apostles at a very early date (not more than a century later per the *Gospel of Judas*) but less than two months after he gave Jesus over into the hands of the Jewish Sanhedrin for his ultimate crucifixion. How do these early apostles and followers of Jesus interpret the actions of Judas? Do they see him as the enlightened, obedient follower of Jesus found in the *Gospel of Judas*. Not even close! They remember him alright, probably with deep emotion as the one "who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus" (v. 16). These early Christ followers saw the betrayer Judas as the man who entrapped their Lord and whose tragic end was already predicted in Davidic Messianic prophecies latent in the book of Psalms (vv. 16-20). To the early apostles, Judas' work was devilish, but not unforeseen by the Lord. For them, he becomes a tragic warning to those who would claim to be converts while actually practicing evil (like Ananias and Sapphira ch. 5 or Simon the Sorcerer in ch. 8). Indeed, during this Easter season he remains a tragic warning for us all as well.

Hallelujah! He is Risen! He is Risen, indeed!!

Blessings!

David D. Pettus, Ph.D.

Assoc. Prof. of Old Testament

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School