

The Gospel of Judas

Over the last few weeks there have been many news reports about a writing called “The Gospel of Judas”. This has raised a number of questions about the contents of this writing and the view it gives of the reality of the Gospel message. This gives the Church a great opportunity to express her faith more fully and to explain where “The Gospel of Judas” goes astray.

The first thing we should look at is why it made the news in the first place. Any actual texts of “The Gospel of Judas” had been lost until a manuscript was discovered in Egypt in the early 1970. Given the fact that it was papyrus in book form this manuscript could be dated to about 250-300, although the first copy of this text dates from the middle of the second century. For about the first thirty years it was kept in a safe-deposit box by a private investor, where it was largely allowed to deteriorate. In the 1990s it was sold to the National Geographic Society, which began the task of preserving and re-assembling the papyrus and translating it into English. The program of re-assembling an almost destroyed manuscript was really a major scholarly achievement in its own right. The task of providing a translation was also of great importance, since the original Coptic (ancient Egyptian with primarily Greek letters) is unknown to most people. This Coptic version, however, was also made available. This is quite an accomplishment and sheds some direct light on the teachings of the Gnostic heretics. Given that it was a manuscript from about 1,700 years ago and the timing of its release, just before Easter, its release was picked up by the media.

This brings us to the first inaccuracy in many accounts that covered the release of the text. Many of the news accounts referred to this writing as “lost”. While no direct copies of it were available, it was well-known from references made to it by Church Fathers, beginning with St. Irenaeus of Lyons in about 180. He also provided us with a short summary of its major teachings. With the availability of the document itself we now know that the summary of St. Irenaeus was very accurate.

Let us look at the content of “The Gospel of Judas”. The first thing that would strike most people is that it is definitely not what we would consider to be a “gospel”. Usually when we use this term we think of an account of the life of Jesus, this writing contains nothing of His life at all. It is about a conversation He supposedly had, in the spiritual realm, with Judas.

This makes perfect sense since the basic teaching of the Gnostic heresy is that the physical world is evil. Among the Gnostics themselves there was great disagreement about how to handle the humanity of Jesus. Some outright denied that Jesus was human, saying that He just appeared human but was never contaminated by a physical body. Others tried to say that Jesus never really took on human nature but that, at the Baptism, the Spirit just took over a human body to use. Jesus was never human but He had taken over a human body, which He left before the Crucifixion. Still others, and “The Gospel of Judas” would be included in this, teach that Jesus was a high being in the divine realm which was imprisoned in a human body. They would say He never actually became human but was just caught in a physical body.

Towards the end of the writing we have this line: “But you exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” The Gnostic element in this sentence is total. The news accounts, some overstating it, say that “The Gospel of Judas” asserted that Judas was Jesus’ favorite Apostle. This is what the writing affirms, but this sentence shows us why. The idea of salvation being presented here is that Jesus is not the Savior of the world but needs to be saved from contamination with the physical world. Jesus wants to have the physical body that has imprisoned His pure spiritual essence destroyed so that this essence could return to the realm of the divine. From this view we can easily see why this writing, and Gnostic writing in general, deny (or just ignore) the reality of the bodily Resurrection.

A second interesting aspect is that it is ascribed to Judas. In the ancient world it would never have been thought that this was actually written by Judas while he was still on earth. He died, of course, before Jesus died. There would be no way that it could have been thought to have been written by him. Rather it was thought to have been secretly revealed to somebody in prayer. It was that person who actually wrote it down, even though he was not claiming to be Judas or to have actually seen what the writing describes while it occurred in this world.

This illustrates another aspect of the Gnostics, one that led to the downfall of the movement. The teachings of the Gnostics were not based on objectively verifiable statements of truth. Rather, the more enlightened would teach those who were interested in Gnosticism a method of praying. When engaging in the method of prayer the person would receive secret knowledge about spiritual realities. Then the person would often write down what he thought he had received in prayer and attempt to establish a system by which somebody could reach spiritual enlightenment.

Historically this led to great confusion. Different, often contradictory, systems would appear. In Gnosticism there was no physically visible authority to determine which teachings were correct and which ones were not. This led to a great deal of debate and endless bickering among Gnostics themselves. This, in turn, led most people to become disillusioned with the entire system. For this reason Gnosticism had lost most of its popular appeal by the end of the third century. Sometimes the assertion is made that Gnosticism was suppressed with harsh and often lethal methods being used by the bishops and imperial authorities. Unfortunately, in isolated cases, this did happen, but it never happened on a large scale. It did not need to happen on a large scale because Gnosticism had pretty much been exhausted by the time Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire.

As Catholics we believe that the physical world was created by a loving Father. Jesus came to redeem us from sin and this includes our physical bodies, which will rise again at the end of time. Jesus truly became man, including a true and complete body and physical nature. Jesus, because He wanted us to know the saving Gospel He established with His Blood, established a physically visible Church to preserve His authentic teachings in tact. This Church has physical means, such as the Sacraments and other people, to help us grow in spiritual union with God. The Gnostics denied all of this, claiming that they taught a true, spiritual doctrine of freedom from physical corruption. We know, from our own experience, that we live in a world composed of both the physical and the spiritual. It is a much greater thing to believe that Jesus redeemed us both physically and spiritually than to try to deny the true goodness of a part of creation.