

I occasionally (in fact, just last week) get asked if I think Judas Iscariot was a real person or a fictional character, wholly made up. I have a definite view about that. Real person. Actually one of Jesus' disciples. And the one who betrayed him to the authorities leading to his arrest and crucifixion.

But what makes me think so? I talked a bit about the "Quest of the Historical Judas" in a chapter of my book on the recent discovery of the Gnostic "Gospel of Judas," a highly intriguing text that emerged into public view about fifteen years ago (the book: [The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed](#), Oxford University Press, 2016). Here's what I say about the existence of the person himself, starting out with the basic and fundamental question of how historians know about *any* figure from the past (Robert E. Lee; Charlamagne; the Emperor Tiberius; uh, Jesus ...), and then applying the question to Judas.

What kinds of sources of information do historians look for, when dealing with persons - such as Jesus or Judas - from the distant past? The best sources, of course, will be from the person's own time, preferably a contemporary who actually knew the person. If you have a lot of eyewitness accounts, you are in relatively good shape. If the accounts are not actually by eyewitnesses but by later authors who knew eyewitnesses, that's not as good, but still not so bad. If they are by later authors who talked with people who once knew someone who claimed to have once heard an eyewitness, well, that's not nearly so good.

What historians want are lots of contemporary reports, if possible. It helps if these reports are independent of one another. If you have two sources of information about a figure from the past, but one of these sources got his information from the other one, then in effect you don't have two sources but one. If you have two independent sources, that is obviously better than having to rely on one, especially if these sources corroborate what the other has to say. Moreover, it is useful if the sources of information are not overly biased in their reporting. If a source has an obvious agenda, and if the information that it conveys embodies that agenda, then you have to reconstruct the real historical situation, the actual historical data that lie behind the slanted account.

In short, historians want numerous sources close to the events themselves, which are independent of one another, yet agree on the information they provide, while not being biased in their reports.

How do our sources of information about Judas stack up against this wish list?
Unfortunately ...

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