My recent post on Judas Iscariot generated more interest than I expected, and a lot of readers wanted to hear more. I’ve posted on Judas a number of times over the years, but maybe it’s a good time to give the full scoop. If you want a lot more information, you might want to check out my book The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot. That book was prompted by the discovery of the Gospel of Judas; I was not involved with the discovery or the restoration of the Gospel, but I was part of a small team of scholars asked by National Geographic to study it as they decided whether it was authentic and important. Uh, yeah. But one has to look carefully at these things before deciding (as pointed out in yesterday’s post an recent academic fraud).

I may talk about my involvement with the project later on the blog, but for now: my book on Judas arose out of it, and does indeed talk about the Gospel of Judas based on my preliminary study of it. But I use it as an occasion to talk about Judas Iscariot himself, who he was, what we can know about him, what he did, and why he might have done it.

The first issue — one that has been raised by a number of readers over the past few days — is a very basic one. Did he really exist? Or was he “made up” by Christian story tellers who wanted to explain how Jesus ended up in the hands of his enemies? Often it is pointed out that “Judas” sounds like “Jew”: did Christian story tellers come up with the “Jew” who “betrayed Jesus” in order to make a theological point?

I have a definite view about that. I think he was a real person. Actually one of Jesus’ disciples. And the one who betrayed him to the authorities leading to his arrest and crucifixion.

Why should I think so? The following explanation is based on the discussion in my book.

First, in general: 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 ...
You can keep reading the post if you’re a blog member. It’s never been easier to join. Well, or harder. Just join. We still have free memberships; and if you do choose to pay the small membership fee, it won’t cost much and all proceeds go to charity. And you’ll learn so much about the New Testament and early Christianity that your family and friends won’t be able to stand you.

Unfortunately, not as well as we might hope. We might hope for 10 sources from Judas’s lifetime that all talk about him. We don’t have that. Of course, we don’t have it for virtually *anyone* who lived at the time, but still: we do not have any eyewitness accounts to Judas’s activities. Our earliest Christian source, the apostle Paul, never mentions Judas. The Gospels of the New Testament are therefore our earliest accounts. These do not claim to be written by eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus, and historians have long recognized that they were produced by second- (or third-) generation Christians living in different countries from Jesus (and Judas), speaking a different language (Greek instead of Aramaic), experiencing different situations, and addressing different audiences. Even so, there are reasons for thinking that what they say about Judas is, in very rough outline, probably historical. At least at a couple of key points.

The first of our Gospel accounts is Mark, written thirty-five to forty years after Jesus’ death. Matthew and Luke both used Mark as a source but they also appear to have used independent sources of their own for what they tell us about Judas. The Gospel of John probably did not rely on the other three Gospels for its stories, so it is an independent account of Judas. That means that we have accounts of Judas in a number of early Gospel sources: Mark, M (source of Matthew), L (source of Luke), John. There is also a tradition about him independently inherited by the author of Acts. Moreover, we have an account of Judas in the writings of Papias (120-40 CE?), that is not based on what we have in the New Testament.

So here is yet another independent source. Later traditions – such as those found in the Arabic Infancy Gospel or the Golden Legend – are many centuries removed from the events they narrate, and are obviously highly legendary. But the Gospel of Judas itself is much earlier than these, and its author shows little evidence of having used the New Testament Gospels for constructing his account – although he does appear to have known the account of Judas’s death from the book of Acts (so he presumably had read Luke as well, and possibly the other Gospels).

In short, we do not have eyewitness accounts of Judas, but we do have a rather large number of independent sources that all speak about him, and to the same effect: he was one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, and the one who betrayed him. That is significant for historians: if the same tradition about Judas is found in more than one independent source, that increases the likelihood that it is a historical datum (since the sources that attest it could not have “made it up,” given the fact that it is found independently in different sources). That is, it’s hard to explain so *many* sources knowing about Judas without having gotten their information from one another unless the tradition about him was very, very early.

One reason for thinking the tradition is actually historical is that the very heart of the traditions about Judas does not not appear to advance the agendas of the sources that narrate them, as I indicated in he previous post. It seems unlikely that a Christian storyteller would concede that Jesus had no more charismatic authority than *that*, that he couldn’t even control those who were closest to him, that not even all those who knew him well actually believed him. That wouldn’t seem to serve the Christian agenda of promoting
the incredible person of Jesus very well.

This kind of consideration is sometimes called the “criterion of dissimilarity” — the idea that if a view is dissimilar to what people telling it would want to say, and against what they would *want* to say, then it is more likely to be authentic.

The same consideration does call into question a number of the portrayals we have about Judas (i.e portrayals that are so much LIKE what some Christian story tellers would want to say that it’s not clear they could be historical). For example, Judas is sometimes denounced as a stereo-typical “Jew” in sources that are otherwise anti-semitic in their tone – where he is portrayed as a money-grubbing, God-denying, demonically inspired Christ-killer. This kind of portrayal does not appear to be disinterested. Moreover, in the one source named after him, the Gospel of Judas, he is portrayed as the one follower of Jesus who at least as an inkling of who Jesus was, one with “knowledge.” But the Gospel of Judas advances a Gnostic understanding of the world and our place in it, and uses the memory of Judas to promote that understanding. (Gnostics argued they were the ones who “knew” the truth; the word Gnostic comes from the Greek gnosis, which means “knowledge”). And so this Gospel appears to be using Judas to advance its agenda, and is probably not reliable as a historical source, however interesting it is for understanding how later Christians portrayed Judas.

When all is said and done, there is frustratingly little information about Judas from antiquity that we can trust as historically authentic. But that should not lead us to despair of saying anything about him. He appears at least to have existed — based on the surprisingly widespread attestation of stories about him and the criterion of dissimilarity. Moreover, what little firm data we do have about him is illuminating, sometimes in ways that scholars have failed to notice. My view is that we can infer a lot from what little historically reliable information is available to us.

If we are looking for the bedrock of historical fact about Judas, a critical examination of our sources yields at least three pieces of information: his name was Judas Iscariot; he was one of Jesus’ twelve disciples; and he “betrayed” Jesus by turning him over to the ruling authorities. I will be dealing with each of these data in separate posts.