

# APOSTLE



Travels  
Among  
the



Tombs  
of the  
Twelve



TOM  
BISSELL



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ALSO BY TOM BISSELL

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# APOSTLE

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OR  
BONES THAT SHINE LIKE FIRE

• *Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve* •

TOM BISSELL



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Again and always for Trisha Miller,  
and for Heather Schroder

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An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.

—LUKE 9:46

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## *Author's Note*

My religion makes no sense  
and does not help me  
therefore I pursue it.

—Anne Carson, “My Religion”

I grew up Catholic in a moderately churchgoing household and was an enthusiastic altar boy until I was sixteen. Along with my Sunday Mass duties, I showed up two or three times a week for the impossible—early, poorly attended, and much shorter daily Mass, which priests otherwise performed alone. The enjoyment I received from being an active participant in the various rituals of Catholic observance—slipping the bone-white robe over my head, cinching a red rope belt around my waist, ferrying the chalices, pouring ablutions over sacerdotal hands—was real, and I have never once looked back on those years with anything but fondness.

My loss of faith was nonetheless sudden and decisive. I will spare the reader any emotional archaeology of that event, other than to say that during my junior year of high school, while doing a report on a national newsweekly's annual Easter-timed “Who Was Jesus?” cover story, I read a book that forced me to recognize that what I had previously accepted as an inviolate block of readily understandable scripture was the product of several cultures intergalactically different from my own. Moreover, these scriptures contained all manner of textual and translational difficulties, many of which grew more, not less, bewildering as new manuscripts and findings came historically to light. A true understanding of God via scripture suddenly seemed beyond the power of anyone I could imagine. I stopped attending Mass and soon enough abandoned Christian belief altogether. I realize that others have pondered the same quandaries and doubts and come to different conclusions; some of them have written books you will find in my bibliography. *Est modus in rebus.*

I have few certainties about early Christianity; I hope nothing here serves to advance fringe theories fattened by scholarly table scraps. As often as possible, I try to summarize and quantify scholarly views, though I sometimes identify those that seem to me the most reasonable. One of my goals was to try to capture something of early Christianity's doctrinal uncertainty and how it affected the first Christian storytellers. The earliest Christian stories were about Jesus, and at least some of those telling them were presumably related to his earliest followers. Tradition has assigned a term for the most elite circle of his earliest followers: “Twelve Apostles.” Soon enough, stories were being told about them.

From 2007 to 2010, I traveled to the supposed tombs and resting places of the Twelve Apostles. In doing this, I visited nine countries (one of which I literally walked across) and more than fifty churches.



and spent many hours talking to the people I met at and around these sites. Most of the Twelve have more than one tomb or reliquary, but I decided early that I would limit myself, at least in narrative terms, to one site each. This book has no interest in determining which sites have the greatest claim to a given apostle's remains. It is instead an effort to explore the legendary encrustation upon twelve lives about which little is known and even less can be historically verified.

Popular understanding holds that after Jesus's ascension to Heaven the Twelve Apostles, working initially out of Jerusalem, quickly moved to establish identifiably Christian churches throughout the Roman world and beyond. Eusebius, one of the earliest Christian writers to attempt a proper historical account of his faith, wrote that the "chief matter" of his history was to establish the "lines of succession from the holy apostles." But Eusebius, who lived three centuries after the apostles themselves, "failed to find any clear footprints of those who have gone this way before me." There are few facts about the apostles in Eusebius's pages, and as often as not they come from outside the New Testament. Indeed, since the very beginning of Christian history, the Twelve Apostles have wandered a strange gloaming between history and belief.

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After the gospels, the Twelve are featured prominently within the New Testament only in the first few chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, when "divided tongues, as of fire...rested on each of them." These divine tongues apparently grant the apostles the ability to speak in other languages. The "amazed and perplexed" people of Jerusalem wonder if these unaccountably polyglot Galileans might not be "filled with new wine," but Peter, their spokesman, assures the crowd that the apostles are not drunk, "for it is only nine o'clock in the morning." The Twelve Apostles go on to perform many "signs and wonders" before the people of Jerusalem. With this, save for a few brief later appearances in which they referee interfaith disputes and supply general community guidance, the Twelve as a group sink from sight within the New Testament.

How to account for the sudden disappearance of Jesus's specially privileged followers in the only extant primary source of Christianity's rise? The church fathers, working off a strange passage in chapter 10 of Luke, seized on talk of Seventy Disciples\*—unmentioned in the other gospels—who are chosen by Jesus to spread his word "to every town and place where he himself intended to go." Jesus even claims to have "watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" during their travels. According to Eusebius and other church fathers, the Seventy Disciples were Christianity's chief proselytizers.

The authors of the New Testament are not consistent in their use of the terms "disciple" and "apostle," but in most cases they have clear differences in terms of theological responsibility. (Later use of the terms was looser. Irenaeus referred to the Seventy as apostles, and Jerome confidently bestowed the title of "apostle" upon the Jewish prophet Isaiah, who lived seven centuries before Jesus.) The term "disciple" occurs far more frequently in the gospel tradition, though it is usually unclear whether it is intended to describe followers of Jesus generally or a smaller, more privileged group within those followers. Among New Testament writers, only Paul and Luke seem to view the title "apostle" as applicable to those outside the Twelve, though Luke's expansion of the term is fleeting. Paul has obvious self-interested reasons for seeing the title "apostle" extended to those outside the Twelve because he himself was outside the Twelve and did not begin to follow Jesus until several years after his death.

Most of the church fathers attempted to keep the Seventy Disciples separate from the Twelve

Apostles, an effort that resulted in much confusion. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, seemed to number the apostle Thaddaeus among the Seventy. He also included among them a certain Cephas. This is Peter's special nickname in the Gospel According to John, bestowed by Jesus himself, yet Clement appeared to argue that Cephas was, in fact, a different man from Peter. Eusebius, following Clement, wrote that Cephas was "one of the seventy disciples, who happened to have the same name as Peter the Apostle." Paul mentions Cephas several times in his letters, and while it is highly probable Paul was actually discussing Peter, it is not certain. A few hundred years after his death, even the most famous member of the Twelve had moved beyond accountable certainty.

Like the Seventy and much else that distinguished the beliefs and self-understanding of the first Christians, the notion of the Twelve is Jewish in origin and concerns one of Judaism's first historical traumas: the capture, deportation, and "loss" of ten of Israel's twelve tribes following the Assyrian destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE. In his time, Jesus would not have been unique if he believed that the tribes would one day reunite in Jerusalem upon Yahweh's final victory over the forces of unrighteousness, whereupon a new Temple would be constructed, allowing all the nations of the world to worship him. But Jesus would certainly have been unique, and radical, if he foresaw his own followers sitting "on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel," as he says in the Gospel According to Matthew. This suggestion that the Twelve will in some way rule some form of a somehow reconstituted Israel is as explicit as Jesus gets in the canonical gospels about the role of the Twelve.

Most scholars believe the historical Jesus's concerns were quite a bit more modest. They look to his stories, teachings, and parables—tales of dying beggars, angry sharecroppers, quarrelsome peasants, and hungry landowners ordering around their slaves—as indications of these more local concerns. "Jesus was not teaching some sort of new lifestyle to individuals," the scholar Richard Horsley notes, "but addressing local communities about their disintegrating socio-economic relations." While the precise nature of Jesus's relationship to Judaism is a question that will never be resolved, it is difficult nevertheless, to read the gospels without seeing the hand of the later Gentile church.

In the Gospel According to Mark, for instance, we are told that Jesus is understood to have "declared all foods clean" by instructing his disciples, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles." We can safely assume Jesus had some basic connection to his culture and religion, which means that his tacit endorsement of shellfish, pork, and improperly butchered meat is probably not the voice of a first-century Galilean speaking—especially when, in another gospel, that of Matthew, Jesus explicitly says he intends to abolish "not an iota, not a dot" from Jewish Law. In Acts, Peter is celestially prodded to "kill and eat" unclean beasts during a vision. Peter's response: "I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." Not until the next day does the Peter of Acts realize his religion's dietary laws have been divinely rendered void. The vision allows Peter a clear conscience as he makes his first non-Jewish convert: the Roman centurion Cornelius.

Such seeming scriptural contradictions, especially those involving Judaic observance, are why the Twelve were, and continue to be, regarded as important to Christians. Whatever they believed must have been similar to what Jesus believed. The church fathers recognized that the Seventy might have played a more active role in spreading the faith, but the Twelve came to be seen and safeguarded as guarantors of legitimacy. This was a long process—in fact, its full realization took centuries—and became less a matter of learning what the apostles believed and more a matter of retroactively assigning to them the prevailing beliefs of a later time. Clement of Rome, in his supposed letter to the Corinthians, also known as *1 Clement* and written around the turn of the first century, was the first to

explicitly make the case of doctrinal purity based on succession from the Twelve. A few years later Ignatius of Antioch argued that the apostles belonged on a spiritual plane above that of lowly bishops and deacons, who were intended merely to follow apostolic teachings rather than initiate their own. Thus, by the turn of the first century, Christian teachers such as Clement and Ignatius were already discussing the apostles as part of an honored era now concluded.

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Who were the Twelve Apostles, and what, exactly, did they believe? Were they wanderers and preachers conscious of creating a new faith or largely observant Jews who stayed mostly around Galilee and Judaea? Or were they some combination of the two? The church fathers wondered over such matters themselves, and what the Acts of the Apostles told them was not always complimentary to what they wished to believe. Peter and John are shown in Acts to engage in some limited missionary work with non-Jews, but what we are clearly expected to understand as a typical day finds them “going up to the [Jewish] temple at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon.” When the apostles are depicted as operating together in Acts, it is often as men whom the people of Jerusalem hold “in high esteem.”

Acts shows them riling the Jerusalem authorities, of course, much as Jesus had, but the Pharisee Gamaliel urges his outraged colleagues and co-religionists to “let [the apostles] alone, because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.” Gamaliel’s plea for mercy is accepted, and the apostles are not killed but rather suffer a group flogging before the Sanhedrin; afterward, they are told “not to speak in the name of Jesus.” The apostles briefly withdraw, rejoice “that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor,” and head right back to the Temple. Eusebius, noting such matters, wrote with evident discomfort that the apostles “were of Hebrew stock and therefore, in the Jewish manner, still retained most of their ancient customs.”

The Greek word the New Testament gives us as *apostolos* (one who is sent) is the noun form of the then more commonly used compound verb *apostellein* (to send from). “Apostle” can mean one who is an “agent” or “envoy” of a particular message, though to Greek speakers the word might have had a militarily nautical overtone, as it was sometimes used in reference to naval forces dispatched on the errands of a city-state. Scholars debate whether the New Testament’s twelve envoys were actual historical figures, or were created by the authors of the Christian canon (written between 50 and 125 CE), or some combination thereof. Paul, who again was not a member of the Twelve Apostles, writes in his first letter to the Corinthians that his resurrected Lord first appeared to “Cephas, then to the twelve.” This provides crucial evidence that some notion of twelve specially chosen followers existed from Christianity’s earliest days, though Paul appears to view the Twelve as separate from the apostles. Either way, it is the lone mention of the Twelve in any of Paul’s surviving letters. What cannot be denied is that the Twelve play an important role—one, moreover, that would have been difficult to insert after the fact—in three of the four gospel traditions. Most notably, the Twelve became the first to partake of the Eucharistic tradition during the Last Supper, which alone guaranteed their significance.

And yet, amazingly, the New Testament lacks complete agreement about who the Twelve actually were. When Eusebius wrote, “The names of our Savior’s apostles are in the gospels for all to read,” he was passing over the fact that the gospels’ apostle lists have small but important variations. Mark, in all likelihood the first gospel to have been written, lists the Twelve as “Simon (to whom [Jesus] gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and

Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.” Matthew gives a near identical list (though he mentions that Matthew was a “tax collector” and that Andrew was the brother of Peter), and Luke follows it closely but for adding “Judas of James,” dropping Thaddaeus, and giving “Simon the Cananaean” a new epithet: “Simon, who was called the Zealot.” John gives no list of the Twelve but mentions among Jesus’s inner circle one “Nathanael of Cana,” who appears nowhere else in the New Testament. An early Christian text known as *The Epistle of the Apostles*, which may date from the second century and was discovered only in 1896, gives this list, obviously influenced by John, of not twelve but eleven apostles: John, Thomas, Peter, Andrew, James, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Nathanael, Judas Zelotes, and (interestingly distinguished from Peter) Cephas. Such inconsistencies both undermine and support the Twelve’s basis in history. As one scholar writes, “That the lists preserve the names of some of the companions of Jesus during his ministry is beyond doubt. But the fluctuation in the names reveals that they were not all precisely remembered as time wore on.”

Equally amazing is that “Twelve Apostles,” a phrase that today has the resonance of a beloved hymn, appears exactly once in the New Testament, in Matthew 10:2. Its familiarity is rather the result of a kind of synthesis. Matthew’s use of “apostle” in the above-mentioned passage is the only time the word appears in his gospel; he prefers “the twelve” or “the twelve disciples.” Mark, too, uses “apostle” only once. It is Luke’s frequent use of “apostle” that allowed the term its later prominence, though he uses “the twelve” relatively infrequently. John prefers the catchall “disciple,” never uses “apostle” (though he does refer to a “sending” [*apostellein*] in 4:38), and contains only four mentions of “the twelve.”

If their differing labels and names were not enough, the gospels offer portrayals of the Twelve that are sometimes difficult to reconcile with one another. In Matthew, Jesus does not call the Twelve until after he has begun his public ministry to Israel. He sends them out across the land “like sheep into the midst of wolves....Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.” As in Mark, special attention is given to the “authority” Jesus grants the Twelve over “unclean spirits.” Matthew’s Jesus tells the Twelve this: “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the highest housetop.” John’s Jesus, too, shuns secrecy, telling the high priest of Jerusalem, “I have said nothing in secret.” According to Luke, however, the Twelve are told by Jesus “sternly” not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah.

Both Mark’s and John’s gospels seem to view the Twelve, and especially Peter, in an unenthusiastic light. In Mark, the Twelve are chronically unable to understand his teachings. “Do you have eyes, and fail to see?” Jesus asks them. “Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” One scholar sums up Mark’s bizarre portrayal of the Twelve “as moving from a lack of understanding to complete failure to understand.” Mark even writes of the apostles’ hearts being inexplicably hardened against Jesus after witnessing one of his most astounding miracles!

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Within the canon of the New Testament, the apostles are rarely described as fully formed characters, but then few characters in first-century texts were. The few members of the Twelve lavished with any attention at all are often represented by certain iconic traits. The rest are, to modern readers, frustratingly absent of personality. The Twelve are often depicted in the gospels and Acts as speaking to one and then in ways that disappoint Jesus, such as when he asks them, in Mark, “Who do people say that I am?” “They” answer him: “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the

prophets.” Jesus presses them: “But who do you say that I am?” It is Peter, the most discernible of the apostles in all of the gospels, who answers: “You are the Messiah.” This is followed by one of the New Testament’s most puzzling moments: Peter rebukes Jesus, which in turn moves Jesus to publicly liken Peter to Satan. The brothers Zebedee, James and John, are shown to be aggressive and quick to anger, such as when they ask Jesus if he would like them “to command fire to come down from heaven and consume” a Samaritan village, thereby earning Jesus’s scolding; they later demand to know if they can sit at his right and left hand in Heaven. Thomas, of course, doubts Jesus’s resurrection, and the conniving Judas betrays him. The rest of the Twelve are largely anonymous, mouthing dialogue of no distinction.

There is also the matter of the odd doublings of their names: the two Simons, two Jameses, and two Judases among the Twelve (to say nothing of the numerous other Simons and Jameses strewn throughout the gospels) have long confused even the gospels’ most brilliant readers. Christianity’s appeal is largely fueled by its claims of historical legitimacy: *these events happened at this time before the eyewitnesses*. Yet the existence of the faith’s most crucial eyewitnesses is uncertain, for nothing outside the New Testament confirms the Twelve’s existence as individuals.

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It is apparent from the simultaneously idealized and obscure account of early Christian history in Acts that very early something happened to the Twelve that either broke their fellowship or diminished their authority. When Paul first visits Jerusalem, no fewer than four years after the death of Jesus, he speaks of meeting not the Twelve but rather only “apostles,” among whom he seems to include James the brother of Jesus. By his next trip to Jerusalem, a decade later, these apostles have vanished. In their place are what Paul now calls Pillars, of whom he has not much good to say. The title “apostle” itself had faded from use, which indicates it was probably intended to refer only to the Jerusalem circle of Jesus’s original followers.

In the early 40s CE, James son of Zebedee, the brother of the apostle John, was supposed to have been executed, for reasons unknown, by Herod Agrippa I. It is the only recorded martyrdom of one of the Twelve in the New Testament. The ruling authority of the Twelve can, within the narrative context of Acts at least, be judged to have begun to end around this time. When Judas dies, according to Acts, the Eleven recruit community members and restore themselves to Twelve by drawing lots. Yet James’s death merits no such emergency restoration, and the Twelve is no longer Twelve. Because James’s death “pleased the Jews,” Agrippa has Peter arrested. Peter escapes from Agrippa’s prison with angelic assistance, and after leaving instructions to tell the other apostles what has happened, “he left and went to another place” and is mentioned again in Acts only once.

An ancillary explanation for the Twelve’s diminishment has to do with the growing prominence of Christians with little or no connection to the Twelve. In 1 Corinthians, written between 50 and 60, Paul takes issue with growing factionalization within Corinth’s Christian community. “I belong to Paul,” he writes in scornful mimic, “or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’” (Not that only one faction attaches itself to an apparent member of the Twelve.) There was also the challenge of absorbing a growing number of Gentiles into what was still a sect of Judaism. The author of Acts plays down the trauma of Gentile impact on the early church, but Paul’s letters suggest that eager Gentile entrants into a Jewish sect created problems that not every prominent early Christian knew how to deal with. The Twelve Apostles are said to have enjoyed the personal instruction of Jesus himself. Despite that, the Christian community they led was, according to scripture, confused about an

sometimes even bewildered by the issue of Gentiles. This may be why record of the Twelve prominence within the early church is so fragmentary and uncertain, for history does not record a single member of the Twelve, with the possible exception of Peter, as having had any particular impact on early Christianity. It is only Christian legend that tells us otherwise.

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Even after I lost my religious faith, Christianity remained to me deeply and resonantly interesting, and I have long believed that anyone who does not find Christianity interesting has only his or her unfamiliarity with the topic to blame. I think, in some ways, I wrote this book to put that belief to the test.

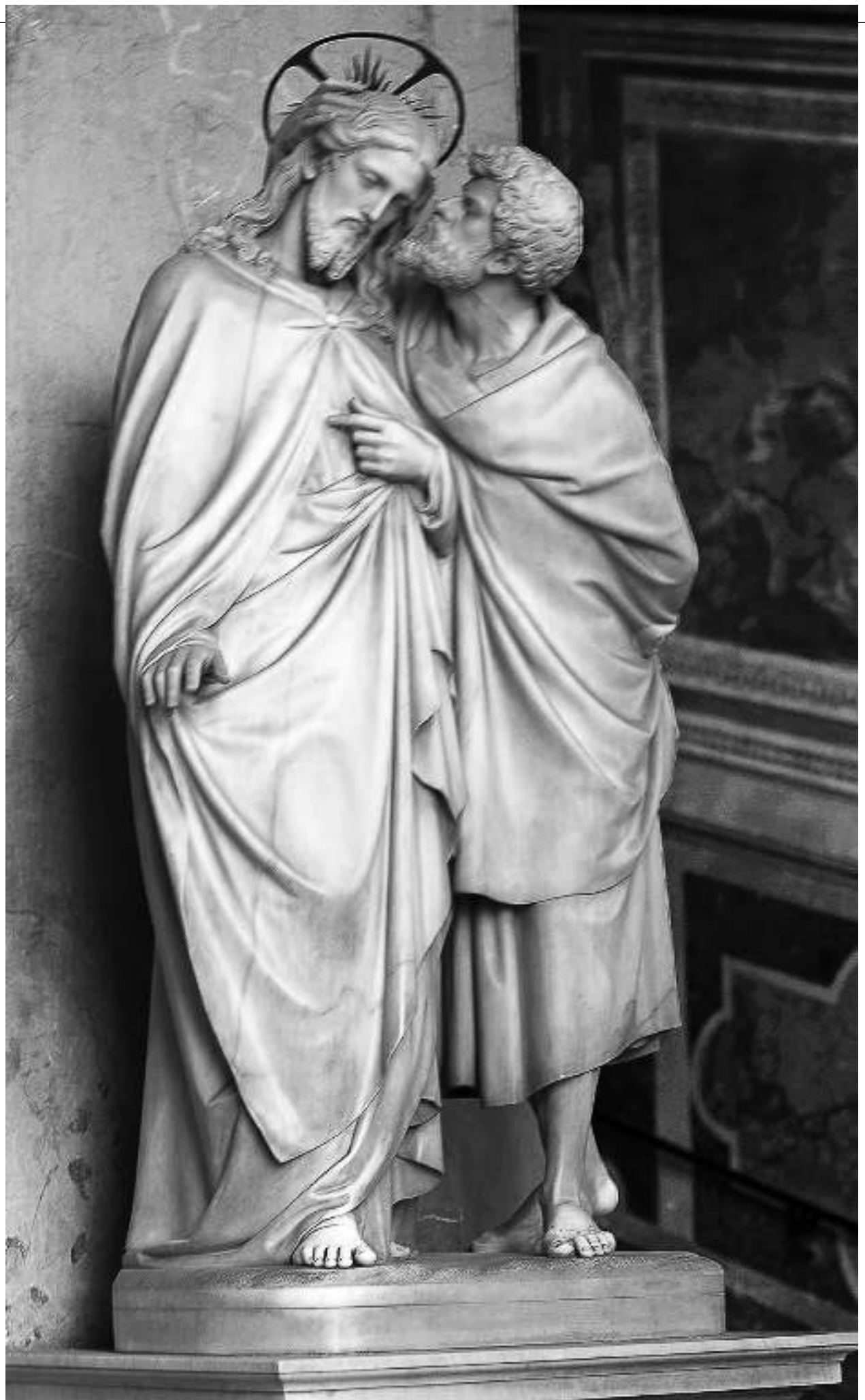
With few exceptions, the biblical quotations throughout these pages are from the New Revised Standard Version; the translations I have used for other keystone texts (Eusebius, Josephus) can be found in the bibliography. I avoid using the word “Gnostic,” a blanket term that scholars who study the diverse theological variations within early Christianity have largely abandoned; instead, I refer to “heterodox” Christianity. For early Christian beliefs in line with those that, in the second, third, and fourth centuries, became the foundation of Christian orthodoxy, I use the scholar Bart D. Ehrman’s term “proto-orthodoxy.” In matters of dating, I have opted for BCE (before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era). Unless it is within an appropriate theological context, I refer in these pages to Jesus rather than Jesus Christ.

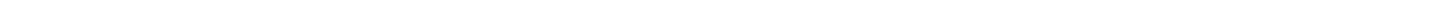
Finally, as a nonspecialist writing about one of the most complicated and widely studied subjects in all of humanity, I do not doubt that this book contains mistakes of fact and interpretation. I have done my best not to distort the biblical, historical, and theological scholarship that now informs my understanding of early Christianity. Thus, any and all mistakes should be blamed on the tares of the Devil, he who does not sleep.

—TC  
Los Angeles  
January 4, 2013

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\* The numbers seven and seventy recur throughout scripture. In this case, seventy apparently mirrored a concomitant Jewish belief related to the number of languages thought to have been spoken around the world; by coincidence or design, it was also close to the number required to assemble the supreme administrative Jewish council known as the Sanhedrin.







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# JUDAS ISCARIOT

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## *Hakeldama: Jerusalem, Israel*

KIDRON & HINNOM · HELL ON EARTH · THE FIELD OF BLOOD · THE PILGRIMS OF NEW ULM · “FRIEND, DO WHAT YOU ARE HERE TO DO” · THE HORRIBLE DEATH · NAZAR THE SHEPHERD · THE DE QUINCEY THEORY · THE MYSTERY OF THE BETRAYAL · STREET FIGHTING

### I.

The first apparent mention of Jerusalem is found on a piece of thirty-eight-hundred-year-old Egyptian pottery. For the vast majority of time since, Jerusalem has been perceived as a remote, baffling place—a kind of world-historical Salt Lake City. Much of its soil is friably poor, and the nearest meaningful river or harbor is a journey of many miles. That this tactically worthless city became the Finland Station of monotheism was one of history’s stranger accidents. God would never have chosen Jerusalem, and so Jerusalem chose God.

Topographically, Jerusalem has nothing to recommend it other than two pretty, undulating valleys known as Kidron and Hinnom, on its southern and eastern flanks. Both are deep and deserts, stubble with little merkins of shrubbery and lined with low gray trees that look squashed and drained of chlorophyll. While these naturally occurring moats offered Jerusalem’s early inhabitants considerable protection against invaders, later epochs would nullify their efficacy, allowing Jerusalem to become one of the world’s more frequently occupied cities.

The sun did strange things to the landscape here, vivifying the dominating grays and sand, weakening the greens, and walling off thousands of hillside houses behind shimmering heat-haze forests. Somewhere ahead of us, the Hinnom valley crossed the Kidron valley, which had a storied past. David traversed the Kidron valley in flight from his traitorous son Absalom. A young Galilean healer named Jesus navigated his donkey along the Kidron valley during his initially triumphal journey up to Jerusalem. Located within the Kidron valley were many of the first century’s most spectacular surviving burial sites—columnar audacities carved directly into the valley’s rock walls—along with the supposed

tombs of the prophets Zechariah and Isaiah.

The Hinnom valley—which begins on the western side of the Old City, close to the Jaffa Gate, and turns sharply to slither along the base of Mount Zion—emanated more sinister historical vibrations. According to a fairly obscure verse in 2 Kings, the Hinnom valley is where children were apparently burned alive as offerings to stubbornly enduring Canaanite gods. Jeremiah goes further, quoting the Lord’s fulmination against those who spill the “blood of the innocent” in this “valley of Slaughter.” Later it was used as a place to dump things considered unclean (a rather overarching category for ancient Jews), whereupon all such refuse, including unclean corpses, was burned. These fires’ greasy soot and smoke, some of it redolent of barbecued human flesh, blew through the streets of Jerusalem, dirtying cloaks and staining buildings.

By the first century CE, the Hinnom valley was no longer used as an open-air furnace, but apparently certain associations proved difficult to shed. In Greek, Hinnom becomes *Gehenna*, a word employed several times in the New Testament. In the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus claims it as a place the “scribes and Pharisees” will be unable to escape, while in the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus refers to its “unquenchable fire.” Here was the rare religious tradition whose creation could be tracked virtually step-by-step. Begin with a site, at the base of a city, associated with child sacrifice and municipal incineration. End with a fiery transdimensional prison imagined as being located *beneath* the physical world. The Hinnom valley was a place where you could literally, rather than figuratively, walk through Hell.

It was also home to a site of profound but ambiguous importance to early Christianity, though its precise location was becoming increasingly difficult to verify. Jay and I peered together at our foldout map. On it, the boldfaced place-names (Herod’s Gate, Solomon’s Stables, Dome of the Rock, Western Wall) were packed together so plentifully it invited despair of ever seeing them all. Down near the bottom of our map, however—stark and alone but for an italicized *HINNOM VALLEY*—was our destination: HAKELDAMA. We had been looking for it for close to an hour. Jay suggested we try yet another path. This was his first visit to Jerusalem. It was mine, too, but he was a historian, so I followed him.

A shin-high wall of pale brown stones lined the new path. Some of the previous paths we had explored were blacktopped; this one was not. Not many feet had been this way: the path’s gravel was still loose and crunchy. To the left was the base of Mount Zion, the southern face of which was bare and undeveloped. To the right were rocky cliffs, atop which were quite a few sandstone apartment buildings. That morning it had rained. In a few places, thick spouts of collected runoff rainwater drained into the valley, as though someone were emptying a series of high-capacity pitchers. Along the path were several shallow caves, most of which were barred. We passed a few apparent dig sites fenced off with thin wire barriers. These little excavations all had an ongoing, archaeological neatness to them, but there were no archaeologists working here this afternoon who could help us find Hakeldama.

Jerusalem’s Old City is a place in which even the alleys claimed sites of world-changing historical consequence. Most of such sites are purported at best. Hakeldama was one of the few places named in the New Testament whose present-day location scholars are reasonably sure is accurate, and yet there were no plaques that commemorated it, no signs that announced it, no obvious paths that led to it. Only caves, mud, and bushes.

From where we now stood, we could see at least ten pathways through the Hinnom valley. All of them were empty. Jay, far ahead of me now, found a sandal and, a few steps later, a rubber ball. We jumped off a small ledge onto an exceedingly thin trail that led muddily toward a new clearing. Finally,

Hakeldama. Exposed stones the shape of mandibular canines stuck up out of the clearing's weedy grass. A dead tree, a rampike as gray and hard as concrete, stood near the middle of the clearing, all of its naked branches pushed one way, as though arranged by millennia of wind. A Palestinian woman in a white head scarf and carrying a plastic shopping bag was walking along the ridge above us.

Very little of the Old City could be seen from Hakeldama. We could see the Mount of Olives whence Jesus is said to have ascended to Heaven and which was crowned with a glittering salt-white diadem of over 150,000 Jewish tombstones. Parts of the mount's slope were striped with tall, shaggy spears of cedar and blotted with shorter, rounder olive trees, but large portions of the mount were barren. (The Romans cut down nearly every tree in the region during the Jewish War [66–73 CE] in order to build siege engines; the mount had apparently never fully recovered.) Jesus was arrested somewhere on or at the base of the Mount of Olives, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the present location of which is at best an informed guess. According to Christian scripture, one of Jesus's own disciples guided the arresting party to Gethsemane, and Hakeldama was traditionally believed to be the place where the betrayer met his end.

## II.

In the various ancient copies of the New Testament texts that mention it, Hakeldama goes by many names: Akeldama, Acheldemach, Akeldaimach, Haceldama. It is a transliteration from the Aramaic *haqel dema* and means "field of blood."

The Gospel According to Matthew and the Acts of the Apostles (universally credited to the evangelist Luke) are the only New Testament texts to mention the Field of Blood. They offer contradictory etymologies of its name, but the apostle Judas, Jesus's betrayer, is central to both versions. Papias of Hierapolis, one of the early second century's most prominent Christians,<sup>\*1</sup> also linked Judas to a field and described its ineradicable stench, though he did not refer to it as the Field of Blood.

Something happened to the disciple who led the authorities to Jesus. It had something to do with the field. Two thousand years later, Jay and I stood in the middle of a place that had a reasonably valid claim of being that field. Here, many believed that a mysterious and calamitous fate laid its word across the most despised betrayer in human history. Yet once the initial frisson of its notoriety had passed, Hakeldama was lonely and unendurably dull. This was disappointing, but so was much else about Jerusalem.

The zoned nature of the city was perhaps its most alienating feature. No one is allowed entrance to as much as a coffee shop without being passed over by a security guard's explosive-detecting wand. This is expected, of course. Less expected are the church doors hung with signs that read ABSOLUTELY NO FIREARMS and the Israeli police horses whose agitated eyes were shielded by wraparound Plexiglas visors. The city's people, meanwhile, lived in something short of obvious amity. Jerusalem's crowded streets had the phobic, elbowy feeling of a convention no one was particularly happy to be attending. Greek Orthodox priests in black robes and rope belts sullenly ate ice cream beside glum Franciscan priests in sunglasses and floppy hats. Hasidim and head-scarfed Arab women hurried through the streets as though in flight from modernity itself. On King David Street, vendors stepped out into the passing crowd, found someone with whom to make eye contact, offered unbidden directions, then demanded a reciprocal favor that their new friend look inside their stores and spend fifty dollars.

The markets themselves were largely a gallows of shoddy merchandise: bowls of beads, boot socks, stockings, stuffed camels, plastic toy sniper rifles, pirated Arab-language copies of *Toy Story*, carbon

datably dried pineapple. At one corner, an Evangelical tour group led by a man with a thick southern accent argued over the opening line of the Twenty-Third Psalm, while a few feet away a Roman Catholic tour group led by a young, sunburned priest stopped at one of the stations of the Via Dolorosa. Meanwhile, M16-bearing Israeli soldiers looked upon them all with unmistakable irritation. A little farther down the street, mouthy Palestinian schoolkids shouted down insults from atop the wall of the Aqsa school. Nearby, tourists gawked at the gargantuan crown of thorns around the dome of the Church of the Flagellation, while others posed for photographs while struggling beneath its freestanding photo-op cross. Young Palestinian men manned T-shirt stands that sold FREE PALESTINE! shirts alongside shirts emblazoned with FOR THE SAKE OF ZION—I WILL NOT BE SILENT!

Jerusalem might have been an easy city to love, but it was virtually impossible to like. As James pointed out, its tendencies toward the excessive should not have been surprising. During the second century BCE, a Jewish nationalist movement overthrew the region's stridently Hellenizing Seleucid overlords and went on to found the Hasmonaean dynasty—a regime that became as cruel and appalling as that of any Greek-styled warlord. In the first century CE, Jewish Zealots devoted to the Temple led a doomed revolt against the Romans that ensured the destruction of that Temple, which was never rebuilt. Christians have never behaved more barbarously than during their various attempts, successful and unsuccessful, to control Jerusalem. Medieval Muslims once sacked the supposed tomb of Jesus itself, and today their twenty-first-century heirs are sent marching in the streets by an errant editorial.

A German Dominican priest who visited Jerusalem in the late fifteenth century was already questioning whether the shrines he kneeled before had any relationship to the locations they claimed to commemorate. The places where Jesus was imprisoned, flogged, and finally condemned by Pilate have been in Brownian motion for centuries, often based on nothing more empirical than where a freshly arrived crusader felt like pointing his sword. In this respect, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Christianity's holiest place, was both an exception and not. While its location is not based completely on fantasy (the first devotional building constructed on its grounds, raised by Constantinian architects in the fourth century, was built in recognition of an early local tradition), many of the claims made for the Sepulchre's other contents (such as Adam's tomb and the literal center of the earth) were puzzling, to say the least. The building that stands today is, by and large, a half-restored, half-reconstructed version of a church first erected in the twelfth century by crusaders. Weakened by various calamities over the last thousand years, the Holy Sepulchre of today only *looked* as though it were about to collapse and kill everyone inside.

Many Christians face a challenging emotional experience in the Holy Sepulchre. They come to see the spot on which Jesus was crucified and peer into the nearby cave in which his body was entombed. What they find instead is hooded, frowning Copts, villainously bearded Armenians, medieval darkness, and gagging clouds of incense. The Holy Sepulchre is divided into various areas overseen by six Christian sects for whom agreement is a once-in-a-millennium occurrence. (Unsightly scaffolds once stood within the church for the better part of a century because none of its caretakers could agree on the form some badly needed repairs would take.) The key keepers of the church are, famously, a Muslim family—the only ones who can be trusted to let everyone inside.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was merely one radioactive particle whirling within the spiritual fallout of the city that contained it. For decades, the troubles of Jerusalem have held our world hostage. This sad reality becomes most evident at the Western Wall, the one surviving piece of the Second Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans near the end of the Jewish War in 70 CE. Visually, it is striking: its crenellated baby-teeth ramparts, the fright wigs of bright evergreen that grow from its

cracks, the irregular size of its constituent bricks, the glowy manner in which it catches and holds the slanted late-afternoon light. Many of the Jews who today came to the Wall prayed for the annihilation of the Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock<sup>\*2</sup> built above it, and within the latter one can find the following written around its inner dome: “God is but One God; utterly remote is He in His glory from having a son.” While we watched people pray at the Western Wall, Jay said, “Jerusalem is a city of contradictions. Three of them.”

Before our search for Hakeldama began that day, Jay and I had stopped for an early lunch in what had become our favorite falafel restaurant. Near the end of our meal, nearly three dozen pilgrims from New Ulm, Minnesota, invaded the otherwise empty restaurant. Their Palestinian guide remained outside, pensively smoking. After the owner explained to them what falafel was, all thirty ordered hamburgers. A Santa-like man with a thick white nicotined beard and intensely merry eyes sat next to Jay; his short-haired, nervously smiling wife sat next to me. Both were eager to chat with what they were delighted to learn were fellow Americans. They had been in Israel six days. What had they seen? Bethlehem, of course. Galilee, where they had gazed upon the very place where Jesus once trod on water. This morning had brought them to the shore of yet another amazement: the dungeon in which Jesus had been beaten, even though the New Testament does not record such a dungeon. And us? We described our plan to find Hakeldama, which Judas supposedly purchased with the money he had earned by betraying Jesus. Husband and wife shifted uncomfortably and shared a bridge-partner glance. Jay quickly explained that he was a professional historian. His area was the Crusades, generally, but his particular specialty was the study of how Jerusalem was perceived by those who had never been there. He described to our new friends how nearly all of the first travel guides about Jerusalem were written by crusader-era scribes who routinely failed—to the frustration of modern historians—to take note of the contemporaneous reality of the city around them and instead focused on imagining they had found the exact spot where Jesus had saved the adulterous woman from stoning or where Mary had learned her Psalter.

Our new friends nodded politely and for a while did not speak. Finally, the man looked up and asked, “Why the heck would you want to see where Judas killed himself?”

### III.

“The figure of Judas Iscariot,” one popular Christian writer has said, “is the most tragic in all the Bible.” Another writes, “He committed the most horrible, heinous act of any individual, ever.” Yet another writes that Judas “is the greatest failure the world has ever known.” The name Judas Iscariot<sup>\*3</sup> has become an electromagnet of wickedness.

Who Judas was, what he did, why he did it, and what he ultimately means have been debated within Christianity from its first decades. In the centuries since, many—believers and nonbelievers alike—have attempted to discern in his few scriptural appearances a personality complicated and large enough to merit the crime of which he is condemned. This has resulted in many imagined Judases. We have been presented with a Judas who is tormented and penitent, a Judas possessed by devils, a Judas possessed by the Devil, a Judas who is diseased, a Judas who is loyal, a Judas who does what he has to do, a Judas who wants Jesus to act against Rome, a Judas who is confused, a Judas who is loving, a Judas who loves women, a Judas who kills his own father, a Judas who works as a double agent, a Judas who does not understand what he has done, a Judas who kills himself, a Judas who lives to old age, a Judas who loves Jesus “as cold loves flame,” a Judas who is the agent of salvation itself.

The scholar Kim Paffenroth, one of Judas's more astute contemporary judges, writes that all of the imaginative toil has been for naught. "We will never see Judas," he writes, "and we will never not see him because, like every historical or literary character, he is found everywhere and in everyone." One of the first Christian martyrdom documents, written in the mid-second century, proclaims that those who betray their fellow Christians have "received the punishment of Judas himself." By the third century, Christians were warning in their epitaphs that any violators or grave robbers would "share the lot of Judas." By the time of the medieval Passion play—a performed reenactment of Jesus's arrest, trial, and crucifixion, the nature of which allowed for frequent extra-scriptural editorialization—Judas had become synonymous with Jews as a people.

The color used to symbolize him is that of contagion: yellow. His symbols have been the scorpion, money, coins, and the noose. In obedience to the many prescriptions of early Christian art, Judas was almost always turned away from the viewer, or beardless, or wearing an unusually colored robe, his hair extinguished. Even as these prescriptions faded from the Western tradition, Judas was often painted as a vile, apelike man. Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* defied centuries of tradition when it depicted Judas not as leaving the table, or already absent, but as sitting near Jesus, his face obscured by shadow. When at work on the painting, Leonardo had difficulty with Judas's face. In the end, he made Judas resemble a prior he hated.

#### IV.

The greatest failure the world has ever known is mentioned twenty-two times in the New Testament. The Gospel According to John mentions him the most; the Gospel According to Mark, which was probably the first gospel to have been written, mentions him the least. In Mark, Judas is little more than a plot spot welded to a name. Matthew and Luke, which most scholars accept as having used Mark as their narrative foundations, depart in different ways from their source when it comes to Judas.

It is important to understand that when we speak of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as being the authors of the gospels,<sup>\*4</sup> we are speaking less of what one scholar calls a "detectable mind" and more of a complicated, even competitive, process of composition and interpretive overlay. None of the gospels are signed, and all show evidence of having been edited in the interests of theological refinement. Authors were not officially assigned to the gospels until the late second century by Irenaeus of Lyon, one hundred years after the last of them was completed. (Whether the gospels were *intended* to be anonymously written texts is a much more difficult and obviously unresolved question.) When Irenaeus attached names to the gospels, it was not necessarily out of the belief that men named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had written them.<sup>\*5</sup> "Authorship" did not have the same conceptual or moral framework in ancient times as it does for us today. Arguments based on who wrote which gospel in many cases hinged on the *authority* thought to stand behind that gospel—this is especially true in Matthew's and John's cases—rather than the person who actually, physically wrote them. This is very similar to the traditions of early Judaism, in which Moses is regarded as the "author" of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible not because he wrote them but because the traditions they contained were believed to go back to him.

The idea that the writers of the gospels were self-conscious newshounds going out and reporting on and remembering the story of Jesus is somewhat anachronistic. The Gospel According to Luke's opening lines claim that its author has "decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account" about the events of Jesus's life and ministry, but many writers of historic

narrative in the Greco-Roman world opened with portrayals of themselves as paradigms of reliability. The first-century historian Josephus, for instance, places early stress on his cool-mindedness—"I shall state the facts accurately and impartially"—yet he is widely viewed as one of the most gratuitously self-serving historians who ever lived.

"Matthew," "Mark," "Luke," and "John" were probably not individual authors writing by candlelight, their memories aglow and their sources scattered around them. The writing of the gospels was, in all likelihood, subsidized by various Christian communities, making their earliest forms compromise-driven. This is not to imply any purposeful dishonesty on the part of the early Christians who wrote and circulated the gospels. It is merely to acknowledge the gospels' nature, which, as a scholar who has studied their most ancient surviving forms can attest, is distinguished by literal thousands of copyist errors, editorial intrusions, and regional peculiarities. Thus, to speak of the Judas of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John is to speak of Judas as he was understood according to different traditions embedded within imperfectly understood processes undertaken by sometimes vastly different Christian communities.

In writing his gospel, Mark clearly had no great designs on establishing Judas's meaning or interpreting his actions. Thus, any questions surrounding Mark's portrayal of Judas are in many ways ancillary to larger questions about Mark's gospel itself. The available evidence overwhelmingly indicates that an oral tradition concerning Jesus existed before Mark was first composed anywhere from three to four decades after the death of Jesus. Does Mark's gospel indicate a break with that oral tradition, or is Mark's gospel the literary consummation of that oral tradition? Did Mark invent key aspects of the Jesus story or merely preserve them? Was Mark the first to join two separate strands of Jesus material (a "words" strand and a "deeds" strand) into what is called a gospel? Did Mark *invent* the gospel form by combining these two strands? These questions are so difficult to answer in no small part because we cannot be sure if Mark *was* the first gospel.

The early-second-century Christian Papias, who recorded an expanded form of Judas's death, unlike anything in the gospels, famously noted that he preferred hearing stories about Jesus to reading them. If that was the case, what, exactly, was Papias hearing? Was it our familiar gospels, now-lost gospels, an earlier oral tradition of the sort that Mark might have based his gospel on, or the stories of people who actually knew Jesus and his disciples? Because Papias knew of a version of Judas's death quite different from that of the gospels, we can assume that other parts of the Jesus story were still in flux in the early second century. Actually, we do not have to assume. Works by Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, and Polycarp, all of whom lived around the same time as Papias, refer to sayings they attribute to Jesus that have no precise parallel in our versions of the gospels.

Mark's story of Judas's betrayal begins with Jesus and the disciples in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper. An unnamed woman sits at Jesus's feet and opens "an alabaster jar of very costly ointment," which she proceeds to pour over Jesus's head. According to Mark, "some who were there grow angry and demand to know why the ointment was wasted. These unnamed people begin to scold the woman. Jesus tells them to leave her alone, because she "has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you...but you will not always have me." Immediately after this, Mark goes on, Judas "went to the chief priests in order to betray [Jesus] to them." The chief priests, in turn, promise to pay Judas when the betrayal is enacted. Shortly thereafter, Jesus announces at the Last Supper, "One of you will betray me, one who is eating with me," though he does not name Judas. Jesus then takes the disciples to the Mount of Olives, where he prays alone at Gethsemane and asks his father to "remove this cup from me." When he returns from his prayer and finds the disciples sleeping, he

upbraids them (“Enough!”), before suddenly announcing, “See, my betrayer is at hand.”<sup>\*6</sup> Judas arrives alongside “a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.” Judas has told the chief priests that he will identify Jesus with a kiss, which he does while fulsomely calling Jesus “Rabbi!” There Mark’s haunting, skeletal account of Judas’s betrayal ends.

Mark leaves a number of things unclear. Was Judas actually inspired to betray Jesus over the issue of wasted ointment? Why did the chief priests need Judas’s help, exactly? At which point did Judas leave the Last Supper? How did Judas know where to find Jesus once he did leave the Last Supper? All are questions that would occur to any careful reader. Few have read Mark more carefully than Matthew and Luke, and both evidently found Mark’s handling of the betrayal either wanting or incomplete. Matthew was probably written between 70 and 80 CE, while Luke was probably written between 80 and 100 CE, so both had access to repositories of narrative and legendary material the earlier Mark was apparently unaware of, or at least did not use. Some of this unique material concerned Judas.

Like Mark, Matthew begins the story of Judas’s betrayal in Bethany. Again a woman pours ointment over Jesus’s head. This time, however, it is specifically “the disciples” who grow angry. Once more Jesus attempts to abate their anger with instruction similar to that in Mark, after which Judas goes to the chief priests and asks them, “What will you give me if I betray him to you?” The chief priests provide Judas his answer: thirty pieces of silver. (This is an apparent riff on the Hebrew scripture Zechariah. Matthew, more than any other gospel writer, worked with various pieces of scripture flattened out next to him,<sup>\*7</sup> extracting as much exegetical serum as possible.) Already the picture is more complicated than in Mark, for Matthew has made money Judas’s motivation rather than his reward.

Matthew also changes Jesus’s Last Supper proclamation to the Twelve that one of them will betray him, expanding it to indicate that Jesus is aware of the identity of his betrayer—something Mark does not explicitly do—and that the betrayer himself knows he has been discovered. The second-century pagan philosopher Celsus, the first person whom Christianity irritated enough to inspire a book-length denunciation, pointed to Jesus’s betrayal as a powerful indictment of his divinity: “Would a god... be betrayed by the very men who had been taught by him and shared everything with him?” Mark provides no protection from the criticism that Jesus was too humanly stupid to foresee his own betrayal. Matthew seems to want to show that Jesus was not surprised by the betrayal, thereby shielding him from accusations of fallibility. Unlike Mark’s, Matthew’s Judas speaks up after Jesus’s announcement: “Surely not I, Rabbi?” Matthew also has Jesus address Judas during the betrayal: “Friend, do what you are here to do.” After witnessing Jesus’s condemnation, Matthew writes that Judas “repented” to such a degree that he brings his payment back to the chief priests. “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood,” Judas tells them and, in a move reminiscent of the wicked shepherd of Zechariah, casts his money into the Temple. He then departs and hangs himself. Matthew’s Judas publicly and unambiguously acknowledges his sin, attempts to disavow those with whom he collaborated, and doles out to himself the most extreme possible penalty. This is not Mark’s cipher, or a placard of evil, but a human being whose actions Matthew has at least attempted to comprehend.

Luke apparently struggled hardest with the notion of one of the Twelve being a betrayer. To account for this unfathomable turn of events, Luke opted for an explanation that would long affect Christian thinking: Judas betrayed Jesus because of Satan.<sup>\*8</sup> This vastly expanded the reach, efficacy, and anthropological interest of Satan, hitherto an infrequently glimpsed enigma in human consciousness. Luke, like Matthew, was in all likelihood trying to counter the potent question of how the Messiah could have been betrayed by one of his own, but his thinking landed him on a radical



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