



Burnet, Régis

L'évangile de la trahison: Une biographie de Judas

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Stephan Witetschek
University of Cambridge
Cambridge, United Kingdom

Since Easter 2006, when the Gospel of Judas was first presented to the public, the “traitor” among Jesus’ disciples has received enormous attention. The book under review, however, belongs only partly to this vogue. Régis Burnet, lecturer in history at the Université Paris-8, has a much broader interest in Judas and in how Judas inspired the imagination of two millennia; in fact, his book draws out the great lines of thinking about Judas Iscariot from the New Testament to Pope Benedict XVI.

After a brief “ouverture” reflecting on Rafael’s “putti,” the book opens with some introductory reflections about its scope (9–18): it is not a biography about the historical Judas but about the character (*personnage*) of Judas as the object of reflection—hence the history of reception.

The first, “biblical” part, “Construction du mystère : Le Judas des Évangiles” (19–130), opens with an outline of how Judas is presented in the Gospel of Mark as the oldest source (23–56). Burnet quite playfully engages with the present state of exegetical research and points out that the Gospel of Mark leaves open more questions than it answers. But what becomes clear even in the Markan presentation is that Judas cannot be mentioned

apart from his “handing over,” which, as an accomplished fact, characterizes him already in his first appearance (Mark 3:19). The chapter concludes with an excursus on whether Judas existed at all or is just a later Christian invention, a kind of scapegoat. Burnet discusses the question in a serious and competent way and comes to the former conclusion: Judas could not have been invented.

The following chapter, “La figure se complexifie: Judas chez Matthieu, Luc et Jean” (57–108), examines how the three other canonical Gospels build upon Mark’s portrait of Judas. The one offered by Matthew further elaborates the character of Judas—to the point of granting him emotions (73: “Ce dernier ne profite pas paisiblement de son crime, mais se paie le luxe d’avoir des états d’âme”). Another important aspect is the pervasive stress on “innocent blood.” The portrait painted by Luke (74–93) becomes even more serious, but it puts Judas in context, too: it is stated that he “*has become* a traitor” (Luke 6:16), and Satan is introduced as the real agent. In this Lukan context, moreover, Burnet discusses at length the different accounts of Judas’s death and the many attempts by patristic, medieval, and early modern exegetes to harmonize them. The Johannine version (93–108) places Judas into the much larger context of a cosmic struggle: he is introduced as “a devil” (John 6:70). Thus his significance is heightened, but he is stripped of all psychological characteristics; he becomes a kind of caricature, and his story a “black legend.”

The “biblical” part concludes with a synthesis: “Dieu a-t-il besoin du traître?” (109–30). Burnet first sums up the basic lines of the four portraits of Judas painted in the New Testament, then points out the crucial question that is left open: What exactly did Judas do? And what is the significance of Judas’ kiss? Burnet reviews the many attempts to answer these questions, then proceeds to a semiotic and theological meditation on Judas’s role in the drama of salvation: he and his action were indeed required in order to bring about what is both necessary and impossible: Jesus, God incarnate, dies through human violence. For God to enter radically into human contingency, an instance of human freedom must be involved; in line with this reasoning, Burnet can parallel Judas’s kiss with Mary’s “fiat.” Judas’s action is thus a function of Christology—of course, this goes far beyond the level of historical inquiry.

The second main part, “Figures traditionnelles” (131–252), is about views on Judas in the history of interpretation. Chapter 4 (135–78) considers in particular the points of view held by theologians. The Gospel of Judas is mentioned rather in passing (137–46). In view of the enormous public and academic interest taken since 2006 in the Gospel of Judas, Burnet’s brief presentation (with no reference to the controversies in interpreting this text) and sobering conclusions may appear like a cold shower to some: interesting though this text may be, its solution to the problem posed by Judas did not make much further impact and was indeed soon forgotten (esp. 146). There is, in fact, much more to be said

about Judas: Burnet presents at some length the fairly original treatment in Origen's commentary on the Gospel of John (146–56), where Judas is seen not so much as an active villain but rather as a victim of a satanic attack (thus Origen's reading of John 13:2, 27 in connection with Eph 6:16). Then Burnet comes to the positions of Augustine and John Chrysostom, which determined the later mainstream views on Judas. After a short detour on ethical evaluations of suicide, he concludes this chapter with a sort of *florilegium* that shows where the mainstream went: Judas came to embody all evil, especially greed and avarice.

The fifth chapter (179–229), then, is not so much about theology in the strict sense of the word but more generally about the “hagiography”—or antihagiography—of Judas. It is a *tour de force* through two millennia of Christian culture, from popular simplifications in medieval legends and a widely unknown Ethiopic Apocryphon called the Book of the Cock, via the baroque preaching of Abraham a Sancta Clara, to the proverbial use of “Judas” even in the notorious “cleansings” and trials in Stalin's Soviet Union. Of course, this chapter is somewhat anecdotal, but Burnet always finds back to the great lines, so that the reader does not get lost in the vast field of cultural history.

In the sixth chapter (230–52), the role of Judas in the history of anti-Semitism is outlined. Burnet traces the prejudice of Jewish greed back to John Chrysostom, who drew the connection between Judas and the Jews—which is facilitated by the homophony between the two words in most European languages. He states that “Judas ne crée pas l'antisémitisme, mais il donne un cadre pour le penser” (236) and traces this catalytic function from patristic and medieval sermons to Marlowe and the Oberammergau passion play to the Dreyfus affair, to a largely unknown play “Judas Iscariot” by Joseph Goebbels (1918)—more anti-Christian than anti-Semitic—and even to the quite anti-Semitic graphic novel “La Trahison de Judas” by Pilamm (Pierre Lamblot) from 1949!

The third part of the book, “Judas à l'heure de l'individualisme” (253–355), moves away from these rather collective identities to the interest in Judas's own personality and even psychology. However, the seventh chapter (259–83) is focused on theological controversies during the period of Reformation and Catholic Reform, a period when great interest was taken in the faith, justification, and salvation of the individual. Burnet begins with the “traditional” usage of Judas as a handy insult by the Reformers as well as their Catholic counterparts, especially Jean-Pierre Camus (1584–1652), bishop of Belley. After that he outlines two fields of theological controversy: Judas's participation (or nonparticipation) in the Eucharist, which led to the question of the efficacy of the Sacraments; and, at the heart of the theological controversies, the question of free will and predestination. Was Judas free to hand over Jesus? Was the handing over necessary or contingent? Was it Judas's own work, the devil's work, or God's work? Burnet's main

references in this case are Jean Maldonat (1533–1583), who defended Judas’s responsibility against Calvin, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who had to admit that the interaction of divine and human action in Judas’s act are ultimately too complex for us to understand.

Chapter 8, “Penser Judas comme un individu: Le Judas des historiens” (284–314), proceeds further in the history of interpretation: we reach the age of Enlightenment and the many attempts to provide rationalistic explanations of the Gospel narratives—and some guesses about Judas’s psychology. Burnet offers a survey of “Lives of Jesus” by both German and French authors with their musings about Judas’s disappointed messianism or political ambitions. With regard to more recent times, he discusses the well-known currents in New Testament exegesis of the twentieth century, with some emphasis on antimodernism.

The ninth chapter, “Notre ‘Judas à nous’” (315–55), eventually discusses some twentieth-century thinking about Judas, by belletristic as well as theological authors and not without some reference to modern—and often antiecclesial—interest in apocryphal texts with a more controversial image of Judas, such as the Toledot Yeshu, the Gospel of Judas, and the Gospel of Barnabas. Burnet organizes the interpretations of Judas’s act by modern writers in three groups: Judas as a (disappointed or overeager) revolutionary, Judas as a man of common sense (who tries to protect Jesus from himself by bringing him into custody), and simply someone who has made a mistake. Eventually he comes back to the theologians of the twentieth century: “Est-il encore possible de penser Judas coupable?” (348–55) The answer seems to be no when Burnet presents three witnesses: the respective pages in Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* (1942), where the paradox of Judas being both a sinner and the *executor Novi Testamenti* is emphasized; a Maundy Thursday sermon by Don Primo Mazzolari (1958), who even speaks of “my brother Judas”; and a catechesis by Pope Benedict XVI (2006), who clearly points out the mystery of divine guidance in Judas’s act and abstains from any judgment of it, leaving it to God’s infinite mercy.

These nine chapters are followed by a conclusion (357–62) where Burnet points out the theological stakes of thinking about Judas—not the least being the concept of God’s omnipotence. The volume finishes with indices of sources and of modern authors (363–73); a comprehensive bibliography would have been desirable as well.

All in all, this book is a pleasure to read, both instructive and entertaining, as it combines considerable competence in current academic discussion in various subject fields with the somewhat detached observer’s attitude. Due to the scope of the subject, one may find Burnet’s “biography” of the character of Judas sometimes a bit anecdotal, but his great merit is to have drawn together two millennia of thinking about Judas, referring not just

to theologians but also to the fine arts, belletristic writing, and theater. Written in clear and easily readable language, it is altogether a very recommendable book.