# Klassen, William. Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?

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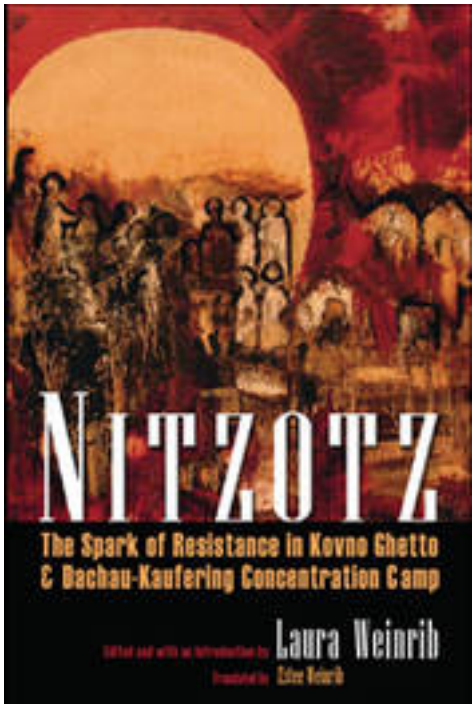


## Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?

**James Christie**

**William Klassen, Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus? Augsburg Fortress Canada, 1996.**
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The late Dorothy L. Sayers, concluded that, [Judas] cannot have been the creeping,

crawling, patently worthless villain that some simple-minded people would like to make out;

that would be to cast too grave a slur upon the brains and character of Jesus." For

those who agree, William Klassen"s latest book will he a welcome and provocative addition to

a reading list.

Scholarly in organization and content, yet happily readable and compelling as a detective

novel, *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* might just as easily be titled, "The

Quest for the Historical Judas."

Klassen is an unapologetic advocate for the rehabilitation of Judas Iscariot"s memory. He

does not whine that Judas is misunderstood Klassen readily acknowledges the complexity of

all human motivation, and leaves judgment to God, the searcher of all hearts. Klassen

contends, rather, that Judas has been deliberately slandered to serve the psychological and

even theological need through the centuries to find a scapegoat for the collective human

guilt for the crucifixion, for all crucifixions, and an explanation for the inexplicable relationship between Jesus and Judas.

Since Judas is unable to speak for himself, succeeding generations have woven an image of him, the unforgiven and unforgivable betrayer of Jesus, from the yarn of scanty and ambiguous biblical evidence Klassen compels his reader to revisit that evidence, and then to decide for ourselves whether we will reassess the character of Judas, and then face the consequences.

To assist the reader, Klassen inventories the sources of the accepted, villainous image of Judas, then exposes those sources to the unremitting light of the Gospels. The result is a more than reasonable doubt of the verdict of the ages, and one is obliged to acknowledge the plausibility of Klassen"s alternate scenarios of Judas" pivotal role in the Passion narratives.

At the heart of his thesis lies the key insight that the Greek word, *paradidomi*,

literally "hand over," has been deliberately mistranslated as "betray."

If so, then two millennia of Christians have been exposed to false witness concerning one

who began as a brother in Christ, and who may have ended the same; a false witness totally

at odds with both the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures, not to mention Jesus" unambiguous

teaching concerning forgiveness.

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of Klassen"s work is his exposure of the blatant

antisemitism conveniently bolstered by the traditional vilification of Judas. In this he

takes on, convincingly, no less a luminary than Karl Barth for what must be seen as a

tragic, if not contemptible, misrepresentation of Judas and Israel.

Full of fascinating anecdotes, contemporary illustration and solid reasoning, *Judas*

is an important book. It reminds us of the complex humanity which permeates an encounter with the divine; of the importance of studying our received wisdom critically; of the need for all Christians to know their Scriptures intimately; of our woeful ignorance of our history and that of our parent, Judaism.

Klassen reminds us that if we fail to recognize Judas in ourselves, we have missed the point of the Gospel; that if we do not acknowledge Judas as our brother, then we miss the essence of redemption; that if we continue to silence the voice of Judas, then we lose something of our humanity, and much of the experience of God"s love.

Source: *The United Church Observer,* November 1996

## Other Reviews

Klassen has given us a fine example of a noteworthy approach to the study of the NT,

giving full attention to the history of its interpretation and use… For teachers of the

New Testament and Christian history and for their brighter students.

*Theological Book Review* 9 (1997): 15

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[Klassen] has produced a fascinating challenging, deeply researched, and well-argued

book. He provides an extensive review of the evidence and careful assessment of each of the

four Gospels" presentation of Judas... His book is the fullest discussion of the Judas

material available, is certainly challenging and deals skillfully with the many ambiguities

in the reconstruction of the historical Judas.

David Scholer, Professor, NT, Fuller Theological Seminary *Christian Century*, August

27, 1997, 766-767.

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I feel the book changed my understanding of the Bible more than any other book I have ever read. I found pieces of the large puzzle I had long been searching for... Thanks so much for writing the book.

Eldon Nafziger, in a letter to of April 28, 1999 the author. Farmer from Illinois, graduate of Goshen College.

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A courageous book that calls for a fundamental reassessment of one of the main characters of the New Testament story... This is a book which will excite much discussion and will require everyone who reads it to think afresh. It will be the standard book on Judas in English for the next generation.

Peter Richardson, Professor, University of Toronto.

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This book is obviously the result of extraordinary research coupled with a real

fascination and sensitivity to the subject. The presentation itself is especially

commendable... Klassen"s point that *paradidomi* cannot accurately or honestly be

translated as "betray" is particularly strong and should show its influence on all future

translations of the NT. All in all, this is a remarkable and useful book

Kim Paffenroth, *Journal of Religion*, 78 (January, 1998): 104-105.

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Klassen is at his best in teasing out the differences in the treatment of Judas in the

four evangelists. Sensitive to nuances, and prudent in judgement he clearly shows the

different way in which the figure of Judas has been manipulated... This is a timely book

that clears up many ambiguities.

Jerome Murphy-O''Connor, *Revue Biblique* 105(1998):151-152.

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Along with solid scholarly work, Klassen includes pertinent asides and

explorations…When old ideas are challenged, in the way that Klassen does here, it is

exhilarating; for then one sees that we are not dealing with the loss of old certainties but

with the gaining of new possibilities.

Art Boers, Pastor of Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, April 6, 1996 *Kitchener Waterloo*

Record.

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This book deserves our careful attention... it is certain to elicit fruitful discussion.

This book is classic Klassen. An experienced NT scholar, he begins with the primary texts,

turning the Greek words until they reflect as much of their own light as possible, "the

nature of the sources must be respected". He does not hide his own presence under the basket – this prophet with a twinkle in his eye knows that he is offering a radical revision...

At the heart of it all is Klassen"s abiding sense of justice and human dignity: he wants his readers to come to know Judas as a person, warts and all, and worthy of respect – as they themselves are and as Jews have also been for centuries. Klassen"s technical exploration of this much maligned NT figure is a Christian plea for peace.

Michel Desjardins, Professor Wilfrid Laurier University, in *Conrad Grebel Review*,1997: 199-200.

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Klassen"s rehabilitation of Judas comes from a reading, solidly within the practices of biblical scholarship, that considers the gospels as products of a lengthy period of Christian storytelling that was as much driven by theological and social urgencies as by

concerns for historical accuracy... The book is scholarly, but readable for almost anyone.

While there is much that is unnerving, the book is always constructively unsettling.

Willi Braun, Professor, University of Alberta, Edmonton. *Mennonite Reporter*,

10-28-96.

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Klassen breaks new ground in showing that Judas" personality is a historical creation on

the part of the Gospel writers...the most important impulse behind this demonization of

Judas was the political and religious need of the young church after the fall of

Jerusalem…

Patrick Cockburn, March 23, 1997 *Independent on Sunday*. London, 4-5.

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This book is an important corrective [to the antisemitism of the past and present]...

Klassen has done a service in showing that it was the emerging church which did the damage by demonizing Judas so that he could personify its Jewish opponents and lapsed Christians… In any case it is important that his conclusions be known to Christian educators who are trying to ensure that the NT cease to be a source of anti-Jewish prejudice."

Geoffrey Wigoder, *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, December 6, 1997, page 27.

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Klassen has written a book that scholars of the origins of Christianity can only envy. It is a well-argued presentation on an important topic that is a pleasure to read..[It assists in] recovering information about important players in the beginning of Christianity. This classroom pedagogy is formative in his book with questions, answers and primary source material all providing a sound methodology. Klassen presents a convincing case that Judas" actions had to do with prodding Jesus with a legal and formal context to confront his opponents with the essence of his religious claims... this book is recommended with

unqualified enthusiasm.

Wayne McCready, Professor. University of Calgary, *Studies in Religion* 26(3) 1997:

367.

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It is obvious that this is a book which will require everyone who reads it to think

afresh about the role of Judas in bringing about the death of Jesus. Klassen has read widely

and gives attention to almost every piece of evidence... All in all this book is a

remarkable tour de force. It offers the fullest discussion of the quest of the historical

Judas available in English.

Bruce Metzger, Professor Emeritus, Princeton Theological Seminary *Alumni Bulletin*,