Judas’ death and its timing

The purpose of this article is to examine the timing of Judas’ death. When did Judas’ death happen? The traditional view places his death around the time of crucifixion and definitely before the resurrection. But 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 speaks about an appearance to the twelve:

1 Corinthians 15:3-5
"For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve......."

For many, this scripture has been a stumbling block since, according to tradition, Judas’ death happened before the crucifixion and therefore, if this tradition was right, then here the Word of God should have written "eleven" instead of "twelve". The purpose of this article is, among others, to throw light to this misunderstood, due to traditional beliefs, scripture.

The investigation below starts by confirming that the "twelve" of the above passage are the well known "twelve" that included Judas. After that, we continue with a detailed analysis of the gospel records that refer to the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus that happened at the evening of the "first day of the week". Though this appearance is not the appearance to the twelve, it is very important to examine it since, as we will see, Judas
was there when it happened. Apart from this, the examination of this appearance is necessary for a good understanding of the gospel record of the appearance to the twelve. After that, the investigation will continue with the examination of the traditional view concerning the timing of Judas’ death and the passage of Matthew 27:3-5 that is used to support it. As we will see from our investigation Judas’s death did not happen at the time that tradition puts it. Instead Judas was alive and saw the resurrected Lord, only to commit suicide sometime after this.

1. "The twelve" of 1 Corinthians 15:5

According to the above given passage of 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrected Christ appeared to the twelve. To reconcile this reference with the tradition according to which Judas’ death happened before the crucifixion, it has been suggested that the twelve here are the old eleven disciples plus Matthias that substituted Judas in Acts 1:26. However, a conjecture like this is not supported neither from the references of the Word of God regarding the time that Matthias was counted as one of the twelve nor from the passages of the gospels that refer to some of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ. But let’s examine this issue more analytically.
It is evident that there is no change in a specific group of people if there is no change in its composition. The original composition of the group of the "twelve" disciples is given in Matthew 10:1-4 as well as in Mark 3:14-18 and in Luke 6:13-16. Luke 6 for example tells us:

Luke 6:13-16
"And when it was day he called his disciples to himself; and from them he chose twelve whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; Judas the brother of James, and Judas Iscariot, who also became a traitor."

As it is evident from this passage, the original composition of the group of the twelve included Judas Iscariot. Thus, whenever we read "twelve" we should understand it as a term that denotes the group of the above twelve people, except if there is a change in the composition of this group. In this later case, when the reference is to events before the change the number "twelve" should be understood as the group of the above twelve men, while when the reference is to events after the change, the meaning has to be adjusted correspondingly. In our case, the event that the Word of God speaks about in 1 Corinthians 15:5 is the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his appearances that followed it. Therefore, the simple question that has to be asked is what was the composition of the group of the twelve at the time of
the resurrection? Was Matthias numbered with the eleven at that time? The exact time and the process that was followed for the inclusion of Matthias in the group of the remaining eleven disciples is given in Acts 1:15-26. From this record we learn that sometime between the ascension and the day of Pentecost, Peter proposed the substitution of Judas by someone else. The candidates were two: the one was "Joseph called Barsabas" and the other was Matthias. How the choice was made and who was chosen is described in Acts 1:24-26

Acts 1:24-26
"And they prayed and said, "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell ["by transgression fell" = Greek: parabaino = "transgressed". So also in Matthew 15:2, 3 and II John 9] that he might go to his own place." And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. AND he was NUMBERED with the eleven apostles"

Now, since only at that point Matthias was numbered with the eleven, this obviously means that he wasn't numbered before\(^1\). Therefore,

\(^1\) The Greek word that is translated as "numbered" in the above passage is the verb "sugkatapsephizo". This verb is composed of the words "sun" that means "together with", "kata", a usual Greek prefix with a variety of meanings (for a list of the New Testament words where this prefix is used see J. Strong: "The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible", numbers 2596-2736) and the verb "psephizo". This later verb, that is responsible for the meaning of the word "sugkatapsephizo", is used in Luke 14:28 where it is translated as "to count" and in the well known passage of Revelation 13:18 where it is translated as "to calculate": "Let him who has understanding calculate ("psephizo") the number of the beast...". Obviously therefore, "sugkatapsephizo" means "to be numbered with", "to be counted with" or "to be calculated
whenever we meet the expression the "twelve" and the reference is to events that happened before Acts 1:26 what is meant is the twelve of Luke 6:13 that included Judas. On the other hand, when this expression refers to events that happened after the inclusion of Matthias then what is meant is the new composition of the group that excluded Judas and included Matthias. Bearing this in mind we should not have any problem to understand who are the twelve of 1 Corinthians 15. The corresponding passage refers to the appearance that happened before "Matthias was numbered with the eleven. Therefore, since at that time Matthias was not yet one of the twelve, the expression "by the twelve" of 1 Corinthians 15 refers to the usual twelve of Luke 6:13 that included Judas\(^2\). Furthermore this places the timing of Judas’ death after the resurrection and after he had seen the raised Lord.

Further evidence regarding the presence of Judas after the resurrection is given by the gospel records of two of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

\(^1\) with" and denotes the inclusion of something/someone into a particular group (see also E.W. Bullinger: "A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament", Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, This printing 1975, p. 540)
\(^2\) This does not mean that Matthias didn't see the resurrected Jesus. In fact, in his proposal given in Acts 1:15-23 Peter says: "Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22). For Matthias to be proposed (Acts 1:23) it means that he fulfilled all these requirements. The fact that except of the twelve others also saw the resurrected Christ is also confirmed by the gospels (see Luke 24:33-36) and by 1 Corinthians 15:6 that speaks for an appearance to "five hundred brethren". The point therefore is not whether Matthias was a witness of the resurrection for he certainly was. What is the point is whether at the time of the resurrection he was counted with the eleven. As we saw, he wasn't.
2. Jesus’ appearance "at the evening of the first day of the week"

This appearance is described in three out of four gospels. For a complete picture it is needed to examine each of these records carefully and to start with let's go to John.

2.1. The witness of John

The witness of John to this appearance is given in John 20:19:

John 20:19
"Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them "peace be with you"

Though this verse does not specifically state who of the disciples were present at this appearance, verse 24 of the same chapter tells us who was not present:

John 20:24
"Now Thomas, called the twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came."

So from the above record we can conclude that in the appearance that happened at the "evening of the first day of the week" (i.e. at the evening of what we call "Easter Sunday") Thomas was certainly not there. This information has vital significance for the right understanding of the corresponding records of Mark and Luke and thus we should keep it in mind.

2.2. The witness of Luke

Having examined the witness of John, let's examine the witness of Luke about the same appearance. The four gospels complement each other and to have a complete picture of something we should examine all the available records making sure that all of them refer to the same event. One of the most frequent reasons of errors in rightly dividing the Word of God, that is especially relevant in the gospels, is the confusion of similar things as identical. Indeed, it is not at all necessary, because two records are similar (the healing of a blind man for example) these records to refer to one and the same event. Whether they do so or not is something that has to be determined after a careful examination of the context of the corresponding records.
Returning to our topic, the witness of Luke to the post-resurrection appearance that occurred at "the evening of the first day of the week" is given in chapter 24. Verse 1 informs us that the day is "the first day of the week". Then verse 13 tells us that two of the disciples\(^3\) "were travelling THAT SAME DAY [i.e. the first day of the week] to a village called Emmaus which was seven miles from Jerusalem". Somewhere in this journey Jesus joined them and verses 15-31 give a description of the wonderful fellowship they had together and how at the end "their eyes were opened and they knew him; and he vanished from their sight" (verse 31). When these disciples arrived at Emmaus was "towards evening" as verse 29 says. After they recognized Jesus these two disciples "rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the ELEVEN and those who were with them gathered together". Bearing in mind that Emmaus was no more than just 7 miles from Jerusalem and that when they arrived at Emmaus was "TOWARDS evening", but not evening, we can conclude that by the time they arrived at Jerusalem it was already evening, "the evening of the first day of the week". What happened at that evening is given in verses 33-36:

"So they [the two disciples that had just arrived at Emmaus] rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the ELEVEN and those who were with them gathered together, saying the Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" And they told about the things that had happened on

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\(^3\) These disciples didn't belong to the group of the twelve.
the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of bread. Now as they said these things, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, "peace to you"

Since this appearance happened at the evening of the first day of the week, it is therefore the same with the one that John speaks about. Thus, the events described by John and Luke are not only similar BUT ALSO identical. However, while John tells us that Thomas was not there, without telling us who was there, Luke adds to our knowledge that present at this appearance were "THE ELEVEN and those who were with them". For many years, I used to read this passage and to think that the reason that the text speaks for eleven was because, as tradition teaches, Judas’ death had already happened. However, the record of John shows very clearly that the disciple that was absent in this appearance was not Judas BUT THOMAS. In turn, this means that Judas was present at this appearance and saw the resurrected Jesus. This also confirms the record of 1 Corinthians 15 according to which Judas was alive after the resurrection.

2.3. The witness of Mark
The witness of Mark to the post-resurrection appearance that occurred "at the evening of the first day of the week" confirms the conclusions drawn from the combined examination of John and Luke.

**Mark 16:9-13**

"Now when Jesus was risen early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. After that, he appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country"

These 'two of them" are the two disciples that were on their way to Emmaus. The phrase "in another form" shows the variability of the resurrected body of Jesus.

**Mark 16:14**

"Later he appeared to the ELEVEN as they sat at the table; and he rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he was risen"

This record that again refers to the appearance at the evening of the
first day of the week\(^4\) speaks again for ELEVEN. Knowing that the absent one was Thomas, it is clear that Judas was there.

From all the above it is clear that Judas was alive and saw the resurrected Jesus. It is therefore not strange that 1 Corinthians speak for an appearance to the twelve. Even if 1 Corinthians 15 didn't say anything about an appearance to the twelve, an examination of the gospel records could very easily prove that Judas’ death did not happen but only after the resurrection and after he had seen the resurrected Lord.

### 3. Jesus’ appearance to the twelve

After all this, the reader may ask where is the appearance to the twelve? Though there is no reason to have a gospel record for every post-resurrection appearance that the Word of God enumerates in 1 Corinthians 15, the appearance to the twelve is also described in one of the gospels, namely in John's gospel.

**John 20:24**

\(^4\) Though the verse does not specifically state that it was the evening of the first day of the week, an examination of the appearance shows that it was the first that was made to the group of the eleven. Since according to the other gospel records the first appearance happened at the evening of the first day of the week it is easy to infer that it is the same with the one described by John and Luke.
"Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came"

This "them" refers to the disciples that were present at the appearance that happened at the evening of the first day of the week [John 20:19] and which Thomas missed. According to the other gospel records, we know that except of Thomas all the other eleven disciples were there.

John 20:25-26
"The other disciples therefore said to him, "we have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" And after eight days his disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "peace to you"

Who were the disciples that were present at this appearance? They were the eleven plus Thomas i.e. "the twelve". Evidently, it is this appearance that the Word of God speaks about in 1 Corinthians.

Having confirmed from the above the appearance to the twelve and that Judas was there when it happened, we will now continue with the examination of the passage the misunderstanding of which is responsible for the tradition that supports that Judas’s death happened before the crucifixion.
4. Judas’ death as described Matthew 27:3-5

The passage that is traditionally used to support that the death of Judas happened before the crucifixion is in Matthew 27 where, starting from verse 1, we read:

Matthew 27:1-8, 11
"When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put him to death. And when they had bound him, they led him away and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor. Then Judas his betrayer, seeing that he had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood". And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood." And they consulted together and bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in. Therefore that field has been called the field of blood to this day....... Now Jesus stood before the governor and the governor asked him saying........"

Far too often we read this passage with the preconceived idea that the
link that connects the above events is time i.e. we assume that this happened first, then this happened second, third etc. However, a time link is only one of the many ways by which we can connect various events. In fact, it is very usual when we describe something very important, instead of making continuous references to other events of minor importance, to describe them by opening brief parentheses. By this way we avoid the continuous detraction of the attention from what we consider as the most important person or event of the story. This is exactly what happens in our passage as well. The great topic of Matthew 27 is not Judas and his story but Jesus Christ and his passion. This is what the Word of God wants to point out and it is this description that is made in a time sequence. Consequently, apart from the story of the person on whom the Word of God focus i.e. Jesus Christ, the stories of other persons or events have necessarily to be restricted to brief parentheses. That is exactly what happens with Judas. Verses 1 and 2 tells us that Jesus was delivered to the governor. Then verse 3 opens a parenthesis to tell us what happened to Judas. This parenthesis continues up to verse 5. Thus we learn that Judas when he saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver. Because the chief priests and the elders didn't accept them, he threw them down and he left. Finally he committed suicide. Though these events are described in a time sequence relative to what happened to Judas [i.e. first he regretted, then he returned the silver pieces and then he committed suicide], they are not described in a time sequence relative to what happened to Jesus. They are a parenthesis that
explains what happened to Judas. We are not told WHEN it happened but WHAT happened.

This is more evident from verses 6-10: these consist another parenthesis that tells us what happened to the thirty pieces of silver. Thus, we are told that the chief priests took these thirty pieces and after they consulted together, they bought with them the potter's field. Evidently, to end up buying the field, it means that after they consulted together, they went to the market, they found someone willing to sell a field, they visited the field to see if it was the one that they wanted, they reached a decision whether they will buy it or not, they agreed on the price and finally they made the relative contracts. Those that have any idea of the time that it is usually needed to only find the appropriate property know that this requires several days, weeks and sometimes months. If we were to read this parenthetical passage as many of us read the one that precede it about Judas i.e. by taking everything in a time sequence, then we would conclude that while Jesus was before the governor (verses 1-2) Judas returned the money and hanged himself, the priests took the money, consulted together, found someone that was selling a field, saw the field, reached an agreement about it and made the contracts. All these are simply impossible to happen when Jesus was standing before the governor and in fact without any progress in his investigation. Moreover, an interpretation like this would contradict all that we have seen from the other gospels and from 1 Corinthians that suggest that Judas was alive after the resurrection.  

5 In verse 11, after the close of the parenthesis, the investigation of Jesus is exactly at the same stage as in verse 2 i.e. Jesus is standing before the governor.
However, the things are not like this. The great topic that the Word of God describes in Matthew 27 is Jesus Christ and his passion. Thus, it has to discuss other things in brief parentheses. Verses 1-2 tell us that Jesus was brought to the governor. Then, verses 3-5 open a parenthesis where we learn very briefly what happened to Judas. We are not told WHEN Judas’ death happened but WHAT Judas did. Then a new parenthesis is opened in verse 6 that continues till verse 10 where it is described again very briefly what happened to the thirty pieces of silver. Again the topic is not WHEN these events happened but WHAT happened. Then, verse 11 takes us back to the point where verse 2 stopped i.e. to the investigation of Jesus by Pilate. The parenthetical character of verses 3-10 and the fact that what is described there is not given in a time sequence relative to the great topic of the chapter: the passion of Jesus, is evident by just reading the passage without verses 3-10:

Matthew 27:1-2, 11

"When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put him to death. And when they had bound him, they led him away and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor.......Now Jesus stood before the governor. And the governor asked him, saying, "are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus said: "You say"

As it is obvious the omission of verses 3-10 does not cause any lack in
our understanding of the great topic of the passage, and exactly this was the purpose of God when He put these verses as a parenthesis.

To conclude therefore the focus of Matthew’s record is not when Judas’ death happened but what Judas did. To learn the WHEN, the timing of Judas’ death, we need to consult the other records as well, to see what they say. With the evidence that we have collected so far we know that Judas saw the resurrected Christ and in fact we know that he was alive at least eight days (John 20:26) after the first appearance to the eleven. On the other hand, Peter in a speech given sometime between the ascension and the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:15-22) said that Judas was dead. This means that the death of Judas, his suicide, happened sometime between eight days after the resurrection and the day that Peter spoke.

5. What's the difference if Judas’ death happened before or after the resurrection?

For those that will ask this question, it has to be said that here we didn't simply try to find the exact time at which Judas’ death happened. This alone might have minor significance IF it didn’t cause any perceived issue with the accuracy of the Word of God. Surely, I would have no problem if Judas’ death happened before the crucifixion IF the Word told me so. In contrast, I would have many problems if in one place the Word, as tradition
thinks, tells me that he is dead before the crucifixion and in another I'm
told that he is alive after the resurrection. Then, the examination is no
longer a simple examination of the timing of Judas’ death but an
examination of the accuracy of the Word of God. The timing therefore of
Judas’ death does make a difference, and in fact a very big difference: the
difference between an unerring Word of God, as indeed the Bible is, and a
word that has errors as tradition makes the Bible to look like.

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