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An Historian's View of the "Gospel of Judas"

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An Historian's View of the Gospel of Judas

The general public may be forgiven for thinking that the newly released Gospel of Judas has meaning only for the historical discussion of Jesus's betrayer, Judas Iscariot. Are we to believe from this document that the poor guy, vilified through history, was simply railroaded like all those death-row inmates suddenly saved through new DNA evidence? Or, conversely, is this sympathetic picture of Jesus's erstwhile disciple simply meant to confuse the Easter-observant Christian public, today as in early Christian times, with heretical notions nourished by The Da Vinci Code? With some scholars weighing in on the Judas Gospel as a radical new picture of the historical Judas, others denying any popular significance, and finally pundits and prelates declaring the obvious superiority of the Gospels of Matthew and John on all Judas matters, an interested secular reader might well wonder how to evaluate the text. Is it interesting or just weird?

If we set aside the historical reconstruction of Jesus's last days as problematic in itself (even given the relative antiquity of our earliest gospels) and the history of the vilification of the character Judas as a separate topic (one closely linked to the history of anti-Semitism), we are then left with a typical, yet fascinating, document of the late-second century of Christianity. This was a time, as historians know well, that Christian teachings were diversifying as quickly and creatively as Darwin's finches in the Galapagos, even while certain writers like Irenaeus of Lyons and Eusebius of Caesarea were insisting, speciously, on the essential unity of Christianity. We know of this diversity first from the testimony of various Christians of that time, like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, as well as from the many mysterious apocryphal texts preserved over the centuries in the Armenian, Ethiopian, Coptic, and Slavonic churches. But we also have come to know

the range and depth of early Christian diversity from manuscript discoveries like the Nag Hammadi Library, an extensive cache of ancient revelatory documents—most of them Christian in orientation—that had been hidden in jars in a cave as a result of some fourth- or fifth-century library purge. The Nag Hammadi Library was rediscovered in the mid-twentieth century and is now widely available in several paperback editions.

What is the Gospel of Judas?

The Gospel of Judas is the most remarkable of four ancient texts bound together in antiquity and discovered in the late 1970s in Egypt. Having been stowed away in a Swiss bank vault for decades, they were only recently rediscovered and subjected to critical study. People have marveled at the existence of the Judas Gospel, for it presents Judas Iscariot not only as Jesus's betrayer but as his enlightened, favored disciple.

This Gospel of Judas is written in the language of Coptic, that is, a late form of Egyptian using Greek letters, but it seems to have been originally composed in Greek. In fact, a church father of the second century CE, Irenaeus of Lyons, mentions a Gospel of Judas that was read by his theological opponents. So historians believe the Gospel of Judas goes back to the second century, even though the version just discovered is a fourth- or fifth-century copy. By contrast, the canonical gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John come from the late- first and early-second centuries. It is unlikely that the Gospel of Judas contains a separate or more authentic picture of Judas than the canonical story.

The text itself is quite brief, opening on Jesus among his disciples. Jesus enrages the disciples by criticizing their piety but then takes Judas Iscariot aside as favored disciple. He predicts Judas's vilification by the others and proceeds to reveal to him secrets about the creation, the universe, and the Temple of Jerusalem. At the end of the text, fulfilling the canonical story of betrayal, Judas takes money and hands Jesus over to Temple scribes.

The purchase, restoration, and publication of the Gospel of Judas were funded by the National

The Judas Gospel is similar to the various reexaminations of Jesus's life found in the Nag Hammadi Library, like the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Gospel of Philip, and the Apocryphon of John. What is exciting for the historian of early Christianity, then, is not the issue of which texts offer historically authentic biographies, but rather the question, what was going on at this time to motivate all these

compositions? How were people reexamining Jesus's life and nature? Why were they developing the characters of disciples and apostles that the earlier, canonical gospels had left in the shadows?

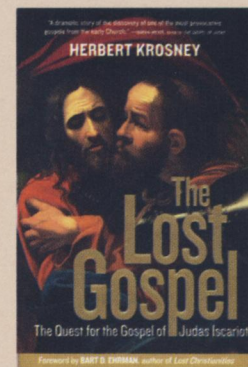
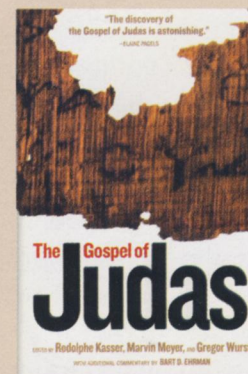
If we dispense with terms like heresy and orthodoxy and even gnosticism, which scholars have increasingly found imprecise for classifying ancient ideas, if we instead engage sympathetically with the intellectual

Geographic Society, which quickly produced a little book for the general public (*The Gospel of Judas: Critical Edition*, ed. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst [Washington DC, 2007] now in its second, "critical" edition) that included an annotated translation of the text and essays by senior scholars on the discovery of the manuscript, its representation of Judas, and the kind of Christians who would have read it. From the National Geographic Society website one can also access the Coptic text and translation (<http://www9.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/>).

Since 2006, several debates have arisen among scholars over the interpretation of the text (although not over the historicity of its Judas, which remains rather negligible), and a good number of accessible trade books have emerged, most with good translations from the Coptic. Most argue that the Gospel of Judas provides a kind of vindication of the gospel character Judas that fits into the many paradoxical readings of the Jesus story current in the second century, notably Bart Ehrman's lucid and historically authoritative *Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and Elaine Pagels and Karen King's *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (Penguin, 2007), which proposes that the book was written partly to criticize the cult of martyrdom so dear to many early Christians' hearts. For the reader interested in the whole panorama of Judas texts, Marvin Meyer accompanies his translation with several other striking documents from the second and third centuries that reconceive Judas, as well as other "traitor" stories from antiquity (*Judas: The Definitive Collection of Gospels and Legends about the Infamous Apostle of Jesus* [Harper, 2007]). Following her *New York Times* op-ed piece (December 1, 2007)

April DeConick tells her story of discovering a darker Judas in the same text, one whom Jesus reveals as a demonic acolyte of the evil world ruler and whose eventual betrayal of Jesus must therefore be parody (*The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* [Continuum, 2007]).

Scholarly debate will continue about the nature of Judas's literary vindication, demonization, or exploration in the Gospel of Judas; about how the text reflects other historical and doctrinal developments; and about the text's relationship to the various religious movements once called gnosticism. In fact, one international conference volume, *L'Évangile de Judas: le contexte historique et littéraire d'un nouvel apocryphe*, ed. Madeleine Scopello (Leiden: Brill), is already in press. Delving into the Judas Gospel, its various interpretations, and all the other ancient depictions of disciples takes the reader into the thick of debates in the formative church. Those interested in more texts of this kind and period might also peruse James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (3rd ed.; Harper & Row, 1988); Bentley Layton, ed., *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Doubleday, 1987); or Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Gnostic Gospels of Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 2005).



worlds behind these texts, then we can encounter ancient people thinking very seriously about the nature of Jesus on earth and the different disciples who surrounded him. Already by the end of the first century, while many people in the movement we now call "Christian" were discussing Jesus as an archetypal Jewish martyr whose sufferings had divine meaning, others were speculating that this divine being who came to earth had only assumed human form rather than becoming human in essence. In this interpretation of Christ's nature, which extends naturally from Paul (Phil 2:6–7) and the Johannine gospel (3:13–14; 12:45–46, etc.), the crucifixion only affected the external human "form" of Christ, not his essential divine being, whose purpose was to teach and reveal to humanity (or a select group of humanity) the truths of the heavenly world. This is the "docetic" interpretation of Jesus, after the Greek word for "[only] seeming [to be flesh]," and by the mid-second century it was as sensible and well-established a Christology in the Mediterranean world as those that emphasized Jesus's exorcisms and healings, his Davidic messiah-ship, or his sufferings. In many of the texts that promote a docetic interpretation, Jesus appears to different disciples in different forms according to the spiritual maturity of the beholder: a child, a youth, an old man. From the docetic perspective, his crucifixion served simply as a symbol for the rejection of the fleshly world and for his triumph over the demonic beings who created that world (an idea also anticipated in the Gospel of John [12:31]). Only the unenlightened, those who cleave to the flesh and the luxuries of the created world, would think that Jesus was actually crucified, while the enlightened believer could receive the eternal "living Jesus" and his revelations of heavenly mysteries.

From this point of view, it is quite plausible to imagine why the legendary figure of Judas, who even at this early point in history had probably gained the reputation as betrayer, might himself become the subject of further speculation. If legend had it that Judas took the initiative of giving Jesus up to the Romans, then perhaps he perceived something about Jesus and his imminent execution that the

other disciples did not? After all, in both the Gospels of Mark and John, Jesus is quite aware of what he is supposed to suffer—as his "lifting up," in John's words (3:14). So then, that disciple who most directly facilitated the "death" and ascension of the Son of Man, would he not have preternatural wisdom?

The Judas Gospel begins from precisely this sort of thinking. It clearly knows the stories from the earlier gospels, even mentioning at the end the "blood money" that Judas received for his betrayal according to the Gospel of Matthew (27:3–10). Following a vision in which Judas himself beholds "the twelve disciples stoning and persecuting me," Jesus tells Judas that he (Judas) "will be cursed by the other generations." It is from the traditionally reviled character of the traitor-disciple that the Judas gospel builds its novel reinterpretation, not from some lost early tradition of Judas as loyal disciple. Yet the gospel asserts that Judas has learned from Jesus the "mysteries of the kingdom," while the other eleven disciples merely fulfilled the intentions of the evil god of this world.

The Judas Gospel thus lies somewhere between a fable, a "what if?" story of a little-known but reviled disciple, and a serious proposition about the implications of docetism. Out of the inevitability and symbolism of the crucifixion, the most reviled disciple becomes paradoxically the most insightful and most worthy of Jesus's secret teachings. Again, this idea is not so far from the disturbing move in the Gospel of Mark to make the historically intimate disciple Peter into a blundering, ignorant sidekick who denies his relationship to Jesus at the very end. And here too we might learn something about the types of discussions that preoccupied the earliest Christians. In our age of banal discussions of the nature of "discipleship" we forget that in earliest times Christian thinkers were interested in particular disciples and their relationship to Jesus: what he told one but not another, how he responded to this question or to that answer, and even his emotional encounters with each disciple. In the Judas Gospel (and several others) we see Jesus laughing at the lack of insight disciples demonstrate and clearly elevating Judas as unique—as of another "generation" from the other eleven in thrall to "their god." Indeed,

the Judas Gospel takes aim at those “twelve”—apparently stand-ins for some powerful branch of Christians in the author’s time—as fornicators, sinners, and child-sacrificers, bitter words from the ranks of the gnostics, more typical of their opponents’ rhetoric. But the elevation of certain, marginal disciples over other mainstream ones was a common device in stories about Jesus. In the Gospel of John, it is the unnamed “beloved disciple” who is constantly at Jesus’s side, learning things that Peter, Thomas, and others do not understand. In the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Mary, it is Mary Magdalene who is elevated above a rather petulant Peter as the preferred disciple. Other texts make clear that Thomas, Jesus’s spiritual “twin,” had once had favored status.

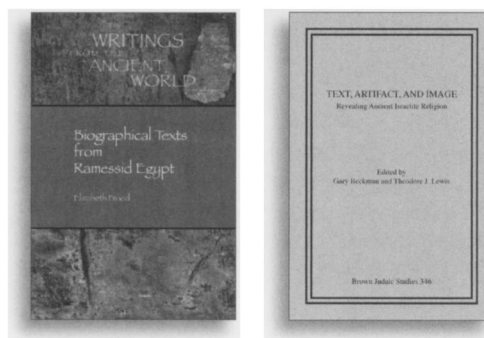
These matters were not literary or folkloric; they were the very basis of theological teachings about Jesus, the crucifixion, and the nature of the world, even the boundaries of true Christianity. If contemporary Christians remain happy to derive themselves from the line of Peter (and to some degree Paul), they might ponder a time when there were many other such lines in dialogue and conflict. And lest church leaders try to argue that these other lines were esoteric and elitist, we might appreciate that the book that originally held the Judas Gospel, like the volumes found at Nag Hammadi, was clearly an eclectic compilation of different teachings and authorities: Allogenes, The Letter of Peter to Philip, The First Apocalypse of James. The Judas gospel was not an historical declaration on the position of Judas, then, but a thought-piece, a proposition or speculation, among many others of the time.

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