

What should we think about the Gospel of Judas?

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Thursday April 6, 2006, the National Geographic Society held a press conference at its Washington DC headquarters and announced to some 120 news media the recovery, restoration, and translation of the *Gospel of Judas*. The story appeared as headline news in dozens of major newspapers around the world and was the topic of discussion in a variety of news programs on television that evening and subsequent evenings. A two-hour document aired on the National Geographic Channel Sunday evening April 9 and has aired several times since.

What is the *Gospel of Judas*? Why all the fuss, and what should Christians and others think about it?

The Discovery of the Gospel of Judas

As best as investigators can determine, a leather-bound codex (or ancient book), whose pages consist of papyrus, was discovered in the late 1970s, perhaps in 1978, in Egypt, perhaps in a cave. For the next five years the codex, written in the Coptic language,¹ was passed around the Egyptian antiquities market. In 1983 Stephen Emmel, a Coptic scholar, acting on behalf of James Robinson, formerly of Claremont Graduate University and well known for his work on the similar Nag Hammadi codices, examined the recently discovered codex in Geneva. Emmel was able to identify four tractates, including one that frequently mentioned Judas in conversation with Jesus. He concluded that the codex was genuine (i.e., not a forgery) and that it probably dated to the fourth century. Subsequent scientific tests confirmed Emmel's educated guess.

The seller was unable to obtain his asking price. After that the codex journeyed to the United States, where it ended up in a safe deposit box in Long Island, New York, and where it suffered serious deterioration. Another dealer placed it in a deep freezer, mistakenly thinking that the extreme cold would protect the codex from damaging humidity. Unfortunately, the codex suffered badly, with the papyrus turning dark brown and becoming brittle.

Happily, the codex was eventually acquired by the Maecenas Foundation in Switzerland and, with the assistance of the National Geographic Society,

¹ Coptic is the Egyptian language, which in the time after Alexander's fourth century BC conquest of the Middle East, came to adopt the Greek alphabet (along with a few additional letters). The Nag Hammadi books are also written in Coptic.

was recovered and partially restored. I say “partially restored” because an unknown number of pages are missing (perhaps more than forty) and only about 85% of the much talked about *Gospel of Judas* has been reconstructed.

The National Geographic Society wisely commissioned a series of tests to be undertaken, including carbon 14, analysis of the ink, and various forms of imaging, to ascertain the age and authenticity of the codex. Carbon 14 dates the codex to 220 – 340 AD. At the present time most of the members of the team incline to a date between 300 and 320 (but Emmel thinks a bit later).

In 2005 the Society assembled a team of biblical scholars, in addition to Coptologists Rodolphe Kasser, Gregor Wurst, and others, to assist with the interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas*. These added members included Bart Ehrman, Stephen Emmel, Craig Evans, Marvin Meyer (who also assisted in the reconstruction of the codex), Elaine Pagels, and Donald Senior.² With the exception of Rodolphe Kasser, who is ill, all of the Coptologists and consultants were present at the aforementioned press release and made statements.

The Publication of the Gospel of Judas

An English translation of the *Gospel of Judas* has been published by the National Geographic Society in an attractive volume by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst.³ This volume includes very helpful introductory essays by the editors and translators, including one by Bart Ehrman, explaining the condition of the codex, the relationship of the *Gospel of Judas* to early Christian literature, including other Gnostic texts.

The *Gospel of Judas* is found on pp. 33–58 of Codex Tchacos, but there are three other tractates (or writings): Pages 1–9 preserve a version of the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, which is approximately the same text as the second tractate of Nag Hammadi’s codex VIII. Pages 10–32 preserve a book of *James*, which approximates the third tractate of Nag Hammadi’s codex V, which there it is entitled the *First Apocalypse of James*. Pages 59–66 preserve an untitled work, in which the figure Allogenes (“Stranger”) appears. This tractate, which is quite fragmentary, does not appear to be

² The convoluted and fascinating history of the codex, now called Codex Tchacos, is narrated by Herb Krosney, in his richly documented and insightful book, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington, DC: The National Geographic Society, 2006). The story is also featured in Andrew Cockburn, “The Judas Gospel,” *National Geographic* 209/9 (May 2006) 78–95.

³ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas*, with additional commentary by Bart D. Ehrman (Washington, DC: The National Geographic Society, 2006). The English translation and photographs of the Coptic text are available on National Geographic’s web site.

related to the third tractate of Nag Hammadi's codex XI, which is entitled *Allogenes*. And finally, a fragment not related to these four tractates has surfaced very recently, on which may appear the page number "108." If so, then we may infer that at least 42 pages of Codex Tchacos are missing.

The Contents of the Gospel of Judas

The *Gospel of Judas* begins with these words: "The secret account⁴ of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot" (page 33, lines 1–3). The tractate concludes with the words: "The Gospel⁵ of Judas" (page 58, lines 28–29). These lines are stunning enough, but what happens in between is what has given rise to most of the controversy.

It is Judas Iscariot who is singled out as Jesus' greatest disciple. He alone is able to receive Jesus' most profound teaching and revelation. Jesus laughs at the other disciples' prayers and sacrifices. They do not fully grasp who Jesus really is and from whom and from where he has come. But Judas is able to stand before Jesus (page 35, lines 8–9). "I know who you are and from where you have come. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you" (page 35, lines 15–21). After this confession Jesus teaches Judas in private.

At the conclusion of this private teaching, in which Judas is invited to enter the cloud (and be transformed?), Jesus utters his most startling instruction: "You will exceed them all. For you will sacrifice the man who clothes me" (page 56, lines 18–20). That is, while the other disciples are wasting time in inferior worship and activity (sacrificing animals in the Jewish fashion, presumably), Judas will carry out the sacrifice that truly counts, the sacrifice that will result in salvation: He will sacrifice the physical body of Jesus, thus allowing Jesus to complete his mission. In this way, Judas does indeed become the greatest of the disciples

Accordingly, the narrative concludes with the handing over of Jesus to the ruling priests: "The ruling priests murmured because he (Jesus) had gone into the guest room to pray. But some scribes were there watching carefully, in order to arrest him during the prayer, for they were afraid of the people, for Jesus was regarded by all as a prophet. They approached Judas and said to him, 'What are you doing here? You are the disciple of Jesus.' Judas

⁴ The word translated "account" is actually the Greek loan word *logos*.

⁵ The word translated "Gospel" is actually the Greek loan word *euaggelion*. One should also note that the explicit reads "Gospel of Judas," not "Gospel according to Judas," as we have in the New Testament Gospels and in many of the Gospels outside the New Testament. The composer of the *Gospel of Judas* may be implying that Judas should not be understood as the *author* of the Gospel; rather, the *Gospel of Judas* is *about* Judas.

answered them as they wished; and Judas received some money and handed him (Jesus) over to them” (page 58, lines 9–26).⁶ There is no mention of a trial, execution, or resurrection. The *Gospel of Judas* has related what it wanted to relate: The obedience of Judas and how that obedience assisted Jesus in fulfilling his salvific mission. Judas has been transformed from villain to hero, from traitor to saint.

The Meaning of the Gospel of Judas

Writing in 180 AD Irenaeus inveighs against a group he and others call the Cainites, evidently because this group makes heroes out of biblical villains, from Cain, who murdered his brother Abel, to Judas, who handed Jesus to his enemies. Irenaeus has this to say:

Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons, are related to themselves. On this account, they add, they have been assailed by the Creator, yet no one of them has suffered injury. For Sophia was in the habit of carrying off that which belonged to her from them to herself. They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the *Gospel of Judas*. [*Against Heresies* 1.31.1]

In other words, the so-called Cainites identify with the villains of the Old Testament. They do this because they believe that the god of this world, in stark contrast to the God of Light above, is evil. Accordingly, anyone that the god of this world hates and tries to destroy—such as Cain, Esau, or the people of Sodom—must be good people, people on the side of the God of Light. The *Gospel of Judas* evidently shares this perspective.

The *Gospel of Judas* makes a meaningful contribution to our understanding of second-century Christianity, especially with regard to the question of diversity. We have here what may be a very early exemplar of Sethian Gnosticism, a form of Gnosticism that may have roots in Jewish pessimism that emerged in the aftermath of the disastrous wars in 66–70 and 115–117.⁷

It is highly unlikely that the *Gospel of Judas* preserves for us authentic, independent material, material that supplements our knowledge of Judas and his relationship to Jesus. No doubt some popular writers will produce some fanciful stories about the “true story,” but that is all that they will produce—fanciful stories. Even James Robinson, who is no traditional Christian by

⁶ The translations are based on Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas*, ad loc.

⁷ On this interesting hypothesis, see C. B. Smith II, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

any stretch, dismisses the *Gospel of Judas* as having no value for understanding the historical Judas. He is probably correct.

Father Donald Senior, a Roman Catholic priest, stated that in his opinion the *Gospel of Judas* will have no impact on Christian theology or on Christian understanding of the Gospel story. Again, I have no doubt that he is correct.

The only thing that the *Gospel of Judas* has made me wonder about is the interesting statement we find in the Gospel of John, where Jesus says to Judas, “What you are going to do, do quickly” (John 13:27). The other disciples do not understand what Jesus has said.

What is interesting here is that we have at least two other instances where Jesus evidently has made a private arrangement with a few disciples about which other disciples do not know. We see this in the securing of the animal for entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11) and in the finding of the upper room (Mark 14). Exegetes and historians may rightly wonder if the episode in John 13 is a third episode, in which Jesus had a private arrangement with a disciple that was not known to the others. It could be that, as the disciples speculated, Jesus was sending Judas to accomplish some task, perhaps relating to Jesus’ security later that evening. If so, then Judas’ appearance in the company of armed men, who seize Jesus and deliver him to the ruling priests, was a betrayal indeed.

It may be that what we have in the *Gospel of Judas* is a greatly developed, tendential, unhistorical, and imaginative expansion of this theme. Yes, Jesus had a private understanding with Judas, and yes, Judas handed Jesus over to his enemies. But no, that was not a betrayal; it was what Jesus wanted him to do. So the *Gospel of Judas*.

Of course, whatever arrangement Jesus may have had with Judas (and John does seem to be a witness that he may have had some sort of arrangement), being handed over to the ruling priests was certainly not what Jesus planned. Accordingly, the *Gospel of Judas* may provide us with a clue that will lead us to ask new questions about why Judas betrayed Jesus and exactly how he did so.⁸

Writings outside the New Testament and even later than the New Testament sometimes offer important assistance in going about the task of New Testament interpretation. The *Gospel of Judas* does not provide us with

⁸ The motives of Judas for handing Jesus over to the authorities are not clear. Was it greed (as in Matthew and John), or was it Satan (as in Luke and John)? But were these the primary factors or only contributing factors? Indeed, the New Testament provides two accounts of Judas’ fate (cf. Matt 27:3–10, where Judas commits suicide and the priests buy the field of blood; or Acts 1:15–20, where Judas buys the field and then suffers a fatal fall). Judas is indeed a man of mystery.

an account of what the historical Judas really did or what the historical Jesus really taught this disciple, but it may preserve an element of tradition—however greatly distorted and misrepresented—that could serve exegetes and historians, as we struggle to understand better this enigmatic disciple.⁹

⁹ I need to offer a correction to what otherwise I think is a fine piece of journalism. In “The Judas Gospel,” Andrew Cockburn summarizes my assessment of the *Gospel of Judas* in these words: “this tale is meaningless fiction” (p. 91). No, it is not meaningless fiction; far from it. The *Gospel of Judas* is loaded with meaning, especially for second-century mystics and Gnostics, who understood the world and mission of Jesus in very different terms. My point, given in my words, which Cockburn faithfully records, is summed up here: “There is nothing in the *Gospel of Judas* that tells us anything we could consider historically reliable” (also p. 91). I stand by that statement, but not by Cockburn’s interpretation of my comment. What I have suggested in this brief study is that the imaginative tale in *Judas* may in fact reflect an authentic tradition, in which it was remembered that Judas was an important disciple and that Jesus had given him a private assignment of some sort. This is what may be hinted at in John 13. The *Gospel of Judas* alerts us to this possibility, even if we judge its narrative to be wholly fictional.