

What's So New about *The Gospel of Judas*
by Mark Bilby

The latest hot item in the study of Christian antiquity is the Gospel of Judas. The Maecenas Foundation has led the effort to rescue the sole existing ancient manuscript from the already-prolonged process of decay, to piece together painstakingly the crumbling shards, and to analyze, edit and translate this document with a team of leading scholars in ancient languages and manuscripts related to Gnosticism and early Christianity. In a partnering and promotional role, National Geographic has carried out a well-marketed barrage, simultaneously releasing an engaging television documentary, a fascinating website, and even a critical edition of the Gospel of Judas with commentary.

Prior to this grand release, the Maecenas Foundation and National Geographic opted to keep the document and work in close confines. This meant that other noted experts were excluded, such as James M. Robinson, the leading American figure in the publication and translation of the most important collection of ancient Gnostic documents, the Nag Hammadi codices. At a panel on "Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism" at the November 2005 conference of the Society of Biblical Literature, Robinson told his story about being one of the first scholars to see and verify the document, but tragically lacked the funds to purchase it, only many years later to find out about its acquisition and planned restoration. Robinson narrates this story in detail in his recent book, *The Secrets of Judas*. As one might expect, Robinson has strongly voiced his disapproval about how the document was withheld from a broader field of experts for commercial purposes.

With the document now made public, this part of the surrounding academic controversy has mostly subsided. Yet controversy still looms around its significance regarding a particular question. What does this document tell us about Jesus, Judas and early Christianity? The basic content of the Gospel of Judas sounds quite different than what is found in the canonical Gospels, particularly in its portrayal of Jesus and Judas. Here the "secret revelation" pictures Judas as the unique confidant of Jesus. Of the original disciples, only Judas is enlightened and can stand before Jesus; only Judas really understands who Jesus is and what He is about. Jesus himself represents and worships a God uncontaminated by the material world, a God different and higher than the Jewish Creator-God. This false God, whom the twelve disciples worship, is pictured by Jesus as an evil pretender whose divine associates in creation are called "Yaltaboath" (meaning Rebel) and "Saklas" (meaning Fool). But Judas, as the thirteenth disciple, belongs to a special group and lineage, one of the children of Seth, the ancient Biblical figure who has come again in the person of Jesus Christ. Only these select few persons, Gnostics, have the spark of the divine in them, belong to the heavenly realm (the *plēroma*), and long to be freed from the material world. Jesus wants to be killed as a way of setting free this divine spark, shedding the imprisoning clothing of his physical body. Judas appears simply to be following orders by handing Jesus over to death. Only this allusion appears, without any narrative of Jesus' passion and death, and certainly no birth narrative. The scenes unfold like so many teaching moments, select vignettes of interactions between Jesus and his disciples, especially Judas, in which Jesus lays out his Gnostic insights and cosmology.

Much of the content is thus quite new and different than any other document we have from antiquity, especially in regard to the sayings of Jesus and the relationship described between

Jesus and Judas. At the same time, for scholars of Gnosticism and the Nag Hammadi codices, the overall worldview expressed is not anything new. It is completely consistent with what is already known about a particular group of self-identifying Christians existing in the 2nd-4th centuries known as “Sethian Gnostics.” What is new here is having a document from this group that dates back to the mid-2nd century, which makes it one of the earliest elaborations of a developed Gnostic cosmology, not to mention a specifically Sethian Gnostic one.

This mid-2nd century dating of the original Gospel of Judas is primarily based on the treatise *Against Heresies*, written around 180 AD by the early Church Father Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, in which he refers to a “Gospel of Judas” as one of the false, heretical gospels, as opposed to the four authentic, apostolic gospels that eventually came to be in our Christian Bible.¹ The newly rediscovered version of the Gospel of Judas is “almost certainly”² the late 3rd century, Coptic version of that original, mid-2nd century Greek text to which Irenaeus referred.

As such an extraordinarily early Gnostic text, one of the big issues the Gospel of Judas raises is whether it reflects authentic traditions about the historical Jesus and Judas of Iscariot. If it does, then the entirety of the traditional understandings of Jesus, Judas, and early Christianity is challenged, or even flipped upside down. If not, then this document simply fills out one more facet, albeit a very significant one, in our understanding of Gnosticism and the diverse Christian landscape in the mid-2nd century.

National Geographic’s television documentary, though interviewing scholars with multiple viewpoints, was advertised and put together in such a way as to imply that the Gospel of Judas does tell us about the historical Jesus and Judas. The documentary even helped the viewing audience re-imagine this in its enactment of the scenes depicted in the Gospel of Judas. Elaine Pagels, the popular author and controversial religion scholar, stood in as a ready-made advocate of this view. While carefully avoiding any positive claim, she did not hesitate to critique those who denied that the Gospel of Judas contains authentic historical Jesus and Judas material. Her comment, concluding the documentary, was specifically geared to gainsay that of Craig Evans, another well-known religion scholar whom the documentary identified as an Evangelical.

Playing up the controversy between an Evangelical and counter-Evangelical, what the documentary failed to say is that Evans was actually articulating the emergent scholarly consensus on the matter. In National Geographic’s own published commentary, Bart Ehrman, a self-professing agnostic, secular historian and Biblical scholar, dates the original Greek composition to around “140-160 or so.”³ This date favors the view of Evans, as does the internal content of the Gospel of Judas, with its developed Sethian Gnostic cosmology put in the mouth of Jesus. James Robinson, certainly not an apologist for traditional Christianity, has already come to this very same and certain conclusion about the Gospel of Judas: “It tells us nothing about the historical Jesus, nothing about the historical Judas.”⁴

¹ *Against Heresies* 1.31.1 in a subsection dealing with the “doctrines of the Cainites.”

² Bart D. Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on its Head: The Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas,” in Rudolphe Kasser et al, ed., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic), 91.

³ Ehrman, *ibid.*

⁴ James Robinson, quoted in David Gates, “Sealed with a Kiss” *Newsweek*, April 17, 2006.

What does all this mean? Properly understood, the newly rediscovered Gospel of Judas does not turn traditional Christianity on its head.⁵ To be sure, it gives a very different picture of Jesus and Judas than the pictures found in the canonical Gospels. But the Gospel of Judas comes from a significantly later period than they do, and represents a developing Gnostic tradition very different from the person and message of the historical Jesus. The canonical Gospels remain the unique, primary, and earliest sources for the understanding of who the historical Jesus and Judas actually were. On this even agnostic and traditional Christian scholars can agree.

⁵ Picking up on Ehrman's phraseology in the chapter cited above. With this phraseology, Ehrman certainly does not mean that the Gospel of Judas rivals the canonical Gospels as sources for understanding the historical Jesus. Rather he means that the Gospel of Judas was written to challenge the kind(s) of Christianity already becoming traditional by the mid-2nd century. To put it another way, the Gospel of Judas is a counter-Gospel, a Gospel intentionally created to turn inside-out the accounts of other (canonical) Gospels. It challenges the theology and even liturgy of proto-orthodox Christian communities, as well as their traditions about Judas. That the Gospel of Judas was written to gainsay such Gospels actually implies the pre-existence and growing prevalence of those Gospels. This subversive agenda fits quite nicely with a mid-2nd century date for the Gospel of Judas, the approximate period for the development among proto-orthodox communities of the four-gospel canon, which Irenaeus picks up, elaborates, and valorizes in his *Against Heresies* (cf. T.C. Skeat, "Irenaeus and the Four-Gospel Canon," *NovT* 34 (1992): 194-199.)