

## WHAT'S SO NEW ABOUT *THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS*

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The Gospel of Judas is the latest hot item in the study of Christian antiquity. National Geographic was responsible for rescuing the ancient manuscript from the already-prolonged process of decay, for painstakingly piecing together the crumbling shards, and for analyzing, editing and translating this document with a team of leading scholars in the fields of ancient manuscripts, languages, Gnosticism and early Christianity. In a well-marketed barrage, they simultaneously released an engaging television documentary, a fascinating website, and even a critical edition of the Gospel of Judas with commentary. However, for marketing purposes, they also kept it private until this grand public release, quite to the outrage of James M. Robinson, who has been the leading American figure in the publication and translation of the most important collection of ancient documents for the study of Gnosticism, the Nag Hammadi codices.

So what does this document tell us about Jesus, Judas and early Christianity? Some things may sound quite strange and unfamiliar. Judas is Jesus' unique confidant, the only one of the original disciples who is enlightened, who really understands who Jesus is and what He is about. Jesus 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 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 *pleroma*), and long to be freed from the material world. Jesus wants to be killed as a way of freeing this divine spark, shedding the imprisoning clothing of his physical body, and Judas appears to be simply following orders by handing Jesus over.

For scholars of Gnosticism and the Nag Hammadi codices, like James Robinson, all this is really nothing new. It is completely consistent with what we know about a particular group of self-identifying Christians existing in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries known as "Sethian Gnostics." What is new is now having access to a document written by such Sethians whose original version dates to around the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century (in its original Greek; the Coptic translation we have dates to around the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century). This dating of the original Gospel of Judas is based on a reference of the Church Father Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, who in his book *Against Heresies*, written around 180 AD, refers to a "Gospel of Judas" as one of the false, heretical gospels, as opposed to the four authentic, that is, apostolic gospels that eventually came to be in our Christian Bible.

One of the big issues at stake is whether this document reflects authentic traditions about the historical Jesus and Judas of Iscariot. If it does, then our entire traditional understanding of Jesus, Judas, and early Christianity gets flipped upside down. If it does not, then this document simply fills out one more angle of our understanding of Gnosticism and the diverse Christian landscape in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century.

National Geographic's television documentary, in the desire to be provocative and controversial, leaned on the side of suggesting that this document does possibly tell us something authentic about the historical Jesus and Judas, and 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, was their ready-made advocate of this view, though she only hinted and left open the question in this direction. Her comment, tagged onto the end of the debate, was geared to gainsay that of Craig Evans, another well-known religion scholar who happens to be an Evangelical, who had stated that the Gospel of Judas does not represent authentic traditions about the historical Jesus and Judas. Emergent scholarly consensus, even in National Geographic's own published commentary, dates the original Greek composition to around "140-160 or so."<sup>1</sup> This date favors the view of Evans, as does the internal content of the Gospel of Judas, which puts in the mouth of Jesus an elaborate and developed Sethian Gnostic view of the world which can only responsibly be dated to the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century at the earliest.

What does all this mean? Rightly understood, the controversial, rediscovered Gospel of Judas actually reinforces our traditional understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, Judas and Christianity. To be sure, it gives a very different picture of Jesus and Judas than the pictures we find in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This Gnostic picture resonates with the kinds of Gnosticism we see today in New Age religions such as Scientology and even in some segments of Christianity. But the Gospel of Judas comes from a significantly later period than those Gospels, and represents a developing Gnostic tradition very different from the person and message of the historical Jesus and the faith of the original apostles, to which our New Testament Scriptures bear faithful witness.

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<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, "Christianity Turned on its Head: The Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas," in *The Gospel of Judas*, Rodolphe Kasser et al, edd. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 91.