

Gospel untruth

The Gospel of Judas reveals the ancient world, not Christ.

Headlines around the world last month announced the publication of a “long lost” and “suppressed” ancient document, known as The Gospel of Judas. The National Geographic Society announced the publication at a major media event on 6 April, just in time to boost publicity for its special on the National Geographic Channel three days later.

The announcement led to a frenzy of media coverage, ranging from responsible reports to outrageous sensationalism. According to some commentators, the publication of this new document will force a complete reformulation of Christianity and our understanding of both Judas and Jesus. In reality, nothing of the sort is in view. The document is highly interesting, however, offering an ancient and authoritative source into the thinking of heretical groups who offered alternative understandings of Christianity.

The document purports to be written by Judas, even though it certainly was written long after Judas’s death. Nevertheless, the very existence of this document, rooted in the third century after Christ, indicates something of the struggle Christian leaders confronted in defining and defending the authentic Gospel against heretical groups such as the gnostics.

A quick look at The Gospel of Judas reveals the contrast between this document and the four canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The English version, edited by Rudolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, presents an accessible and readable version of the portions of the Codex Tchacos now available. The most remarkable feature of this text is its thoroughly gnostic character.

The substance of this Gospel bears virtually no resemblance to orthodox Christianity — a fact which explains why the early church recognised this writing for what it is, and rejected it as neither authoritative nor authentic.

In *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, Herbert Krosney explains how the codex was discovered and traces the events that led to its publi-



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cation in English this week: “In the mid-to late 1970s, hidden for more than 1500 years, an ancient text emerged from the sands of Egypt. Near the banks of the Nile River, some Egyptian peasants, fellahin, stumbled upon a cavern. In biblical times, such chambers had been used to bury the dead. The peasants entered the cave, seeking ancient gold or jewelry, anything of value that they could sell. Instead,

The Cainites taught the rehabilitation of many characters presented negatively in the Bible – starting with Cain.

among a pile of human bones, they discovered a crumbling limestone box. Inside it, they came upon an unexpected find — a mysterious leather-bound book, a codex.”

The portion of the text that is now translated is taken from 13 pages of papyrus, with the text written in Coptic, a language of ancient Egypt. Most scholars agree that The Gospel of Judas was originally written in Greek, and later translated into Coptic. This was the history of many gnostic texts, especially those associated with groups common to the area in which the manuscript was found.

The Lost Gospel reads like a suspense thriller at times, tracing the odd and admittedly remarkable story of how the codex was preserved and eventually published. Those familiar with the story of the Dead Sea scrolls and the documents of the Nag Hammadi library will recognise significant parallels in the saga of how the texts and manuscripts were found and eventually made available for scholarly review and publication.

The gnostic character of the text is immediately evident. In his supposed conversations with Judas, Jesus speaks in

gnostic categories such as “aeons” and an “eternal realm”. Judas is identified as the “13th spirit” who was appointed by God to be the agent of releasing Jesus from the physical body in which He was trapped in the incarnation.

When Judas speaks of a vision and asks for its interpretation, Jesus answers: “Judas, your star has led you astray.” Jesus continues: “No person of mortal birth is worthy to enter the house you have seen, for that place is reserved for the holy. Neither the sun nor the moon will rule there, nor the day, but the holy will abide there always, in the eternal realm with the holy angels. Look, I have explained to you the mysteries of the kingdom and I have taught you about the error of the stars; and ... sent it ... on the 12 aeons.”

The concept of secret and mysterious knowledge was central to gnostic sects. The Gospel of Judas purports to reveal conversations between Jesus and Judas that had been kept secret from the rest of humanity. The gnostics prized their secret knowledge, and taught a profound dualism between the material and spiritual worlds. They understood the material world, including the entire cosmos, to be a trap for the spiritual world. In essence, the gnostics sought to escape the material world and to enter the world of spirit.

Accordingly, the most revealing statement in the entire text of The Gospel of Judas records Jesus saying to Judas, “But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”

In other words, Judas would perform a service to Jesus by betraying Him to those who would then crucify Him, liberating Jesus from the physical body and freeing Him as spirit. The editors of The Gospel of Judas indicate in a footnote: “The death of Jesus, with the assistance of Judas, is taken to be the liberation of the spiritual person within.”

Needless to say, this is in direct conflict with the Christian Gospel and the New Testament. The consistent witness of the New Testament is that Jesus came in order to die for sinners — willingly accepting the cross and dying as the substitutionary sacrifice for sin.

This redemptive action is completely missing from The Gospel of Judas. For that reason, the text was rejected by early Christian leaders. Writing about the year 180, Irenaeus, a major Christian figure among the early church fathers, identified the text now known as The Gospel of Judas as heretical. In his foreword to *The Lost Gospel*, Bart Ehrman, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, explains: "This gospel was about the relationship between Jesus and Judas, and indicated that Judas didn't actually betray Jesus, but did what Jesus wanted him to do, because Judas was the one who really knew the truth, as Jesus wanted it communicated."

Ehrman, no friend to orthodox Christianity, has correctly explained the problem. Irenaeus rejected the text precisely because it was in direct conflict with the canonical Gospels and with the teaching of the Apostles. Accordingly, it was his responsibility to warn the church about the heretical nature of this document. Still, the very fact that Irenaeus mentions the document with such a specific reference gives considerable credence to the claim that The Gospel of Judas is as old in its origin as its patrons now claim.

We now know a great deal about the Gnostic sects common to the first centuries of Christianity. The particular sect thought to be associated with the origin of The Gospel of Judas was known as the Cainites. The peculiar teachings of this sect included the rehabilitation of many characters presented negatively in the Bible – starting with Cain. In essence, the Cainites attempted to take the negative figures of the Bible and present them in a heroic light. In order to do this, of course, they had to create alternative texts and an alternative rendering of the story of Jesus.

What are Christians to make of all this? The publication of The Gospel of Judas is a matter of genuine interest. After all, it is important for Christians to understand

the context of early Christianity – a context in which the church was required to exercise tremendous discernment in confronting heretical teachings and rejecting spurious texts.

The scholarly research behind the publication of The Gospel of Judas appears to be sound and responsible. The codex manuscript was submitted to the most rigorous historical process in terms of dating, chemical composition, and similar questions. In the end, it appears that the document is most likely authentic, in terms of its origin from within a heretical sect in the third century.

Nevertheless, *extravagant claims about the theological significance of The Gospel of Judas are unwarranted and ridiculous.* The Gospel of Judas are unwarranted, ridiculous, and driven by those who themselves call for a reformulation of Christianity.

The resurgence of interest in gnostic texts such as The Gospel of Thomas and The Gospel of Judas is driven by an effort, at least on the part of some figures, to argue that early Christianity had no essential theological core. Instead, scholars such as Elaine Pagels of Princeton University want to argue that "these discoveries are exploding the myth of a monolithic religion, and demonstrating how diverse – and fascinating – the early Christian movement really was".

What Pagels and many other figures argue is that early Christianity was a cauldron of competing theologies, and that ideological and political factors explain why an "orthodox" tradition eventually won, suppressing all competing theologies. Accordingly, these same figures argue that today's Christians should be open to these variant teachings that had long been suppressed and hidden from view.

Metropolitan Bishop, leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, dismissed The Gospel of Judas as "non-Christian babbling resulting from a group of people trying to create a false 'amalgam' between the Greek mythology and Far East religions with Christianity ... They were written by a group of people who were aliens to the main Christian stream of the early Christianity. These texts are neither reliable nor accurate Christian texts, as they are historically and logically alien to the

main Christian thinking and philosophy of the early and present Christians." The Metropolitan is right, but we are better armed to face the heresies of our own day if we face with honesty the heresies of times past.

Simon Gathercole, a New Testament professor at Aberdeen University, defended the text as authentic, but relatively unimportant. "It is certainly an ancient text, but not ancient enough to tell us anything new," Gathercole explains. "It contains themes which are alien to the first-century world of Jesus and Judas, but which became popular later."

Indeed, those gnostic ideas did become popular later, and they are becoming increasingly popular now. The truth of the Gospel stands, and Christians will retain firm confidence in the authenticity of the New Testament and, in particular, of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Nevertheless, old gnosticisms are continually repackaged and "rediscovered" even as new forms of gnostic thought emerge in our postmodern culture.

Informed Christians will be watchful and aware when confronting churches or institutions that present spurious writings, rejected as heretical by the early church, on the same plane as the New Testament.

The verdict of Athanasius, one of the greatest leaders of the early church, still stands: "Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these, for concerning these the Lord put to shame the Sadducees, and said, 'Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures'. And He reproved the Jews, saying, 'Search the Scriptures, for these are they that testify of Me'."

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