

The Gospel of Judas

The media claims that the *Gospel of Judas* has the Church worried. But, the truth is we only wonder what all the fuss is about. We say, "Read the Gospel of Judas alongside the New Testament gospels to discover why."

The Gospel of Judas consists mostly of a long conversation between Jesus and Judas, during which Jesus gives special and secret knowledge to Judas alone. Jesus talks about Gnostic deities and angels, and then asks Judas to betray him in an act of obedience so that his mortal body will be killed and he can be reunited with the spiritual world. Judas agrees to go to the high priests and betray Jesus. That's the end of the gospel text.

This ancient manuscript lay for many centuries beneath the desert sands of Egypt before being found nearly 60 years ago. It was not lost, just buried. It was not suppressed by ecclesiastical figures, as in the *Da Vinci Code* novel, but withheld from public view by unidentified figures in the black-market antiquities trade. Their motive was not protecting the faith, or the advancement of historical knowledge, but greed.

The 26-page Gospel of Judas is part of a 62 page ancient papyrus book, containing several writings in Coptic and Greek language, dating from the 3rd or 4th century. It is an authentic ancient text, but not ancient enough to tell us anything new about Judas or Jesus. In fact, the text contains a number of religious ideas that would have been alien in the first-century, but became popular later in the second-century. An analogy would be to find a letter claiming to have been written by Ned Kelly in which he talks about the movie *Star Wars* and his collection of computer games. Historians will use such out-of-place clues to decide the truth of claims that the gospel represents the spoken or unspoken words of Judas.

The *National Geographic* release of the recently found 'lost' Gospel of Judas, on April 9, was accompanied with all the glam and glitz of a made-for-TV spectacular. The Society has plans for magazine articles, television specials, and a book to follow. With the credibility of National Geographic they will probably enjoy instant success. But like Hans Christian Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, the fabric of most claims about the Gospel of Judas is genuine fake.

A common saying is that *we believe what we want to see*. It is less often recognised, although equally true, that *we tend to see what we believe*.

The reason why some scholars and so many members of the press promote the Gospel of Judas as a giant leap in our understanding is that it fits with their theory of early Christian history as a battle between competing ideas about Jesus. On the one side stood those who called themselves 'orthodox' Christians holding the four canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. On the other side stood others, including the Gnostics, who had their own gospels. In the end the orthodox happened to win the battle.

The truth is that this theory is both simplistic and misleading. As we know from modern denials about the truth of the holocaust or the landing of man on the moon, the existence of conflicting ideas and debate does not demand equal weight and historical credibility be given to all.

On grounds of historical reliability the canonical gospels have no equal. They describe historical events that can be fixed to the first century. Their written form

today has remained substantially the same since around 100 AD. Every shred of evidence we have from the first-century supports the claim that the physical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was at the heart of earliest Christian belief.

On the other hand, the Gnostic gospels began appearing from 120 years after the life of Jesus, and were a reaction to mainstream Christian belief. They are remarkable for their lack of interest in history. Characters in their stories, like Judas, Peter, Mary, and Jesus are gurus of spiritual insight rather than people concerned with history and going about their everyday lives. In view of their literary character, it is impossible to suggest that they add or subtract anything we know about the historical Jesus or Judas.

The Gospel of Judas is by no means a new discovery. A second century Christian bishop, Irenaeus of Lyons, comments on this document in one of his writings. Irenaeus claims it was written by the Cainites, a group belonging to the religious movement called Gnosticism. Gnosticism took on many forms, but most Gnostics taught a special knowledge (gnosis) was needed to release the divine spark in humankind to reach its full potential. The true nature of humankind was hidden and imprisoned in its physical body by an evil creator god. Like many other Gnostic groups, the Cainites taught that the Old Testament God was evil and hostile to the human race, so all physical realities of his creation needed to be rejected in favour of higher levels of consciousness.

As a result of this belief the Cainites turned all traditional beliefs and symbols upside down. For example, they despised the memory of Old Testament heroes and friends of God like Moses, considering them traitors, and revered Old Testament villains instead. They were especially fond of Cain, the murderer of Abel, and were given this name because of this affection.

One school of Cainite thought is that Jesus came to save the human race from suffering. In order to do so he had to suffer and die himself. The forces allied with the evil Creator God of the Old Testament, however, conspired to prevent Jesus from suffering; thereby stopping his work of salvation. By arranging the arrest of Jesus at the hands of the high priests, Judas becomes the hero in the sacred text of the Cainites called the Gospel of Judas.

So, this question is asked of the media: "What's all the fuss about?" The claim that Judas received exclusive mystic revelations from Jesus is not unique in itself. The same claims are made about Thomas in the Gospel of Thomas. Also, there is no evidence that the Gospel of Judas enjoyed popularity as an alternative to the four canonical gospels, or that it was ever considered for inclusion in the New Testament. Still, along with others interested in the history of earliest Christianity and its environment, the Church welcomes the publication of this ancient manuscript and hopes it will not be the last writing from that period to reappear.

Instead of being troubled by the publishing of the Gospel of Judas, the church welcomes this opportunity for people read it alongside the New Testament gospels. Those who read will discover behind the hype and shine put on these Judas clothes there is nothing new that undermines what Christians have believed throughout the centuries.

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