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Judas: It's Still About Money

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Cashing in on the craze for Gnostic gospels

The re-release this year of several books in paperback reflects continuing popular interest in obscure nonbiblical works regarding the [life of Jesus and the early church](#) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-gospel-of-jesus-4042>).

Last year it was the newly translated so-called Gospel of Judas, the latest pseudo-Christian text to grab attention. Its release was conveniently timed to generate sales during the Easter season. A companion book, [*The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*](#) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Judas), told the story of the purchase and translation of the ancient Gnostic work. Both titles were published by the National Geographic Society and launched together with a prime-time documentary.

It was a great multimedia success, with top-echelon book sales. But while National Geographic's Terry Garcia has pointed out that the society spent a significant sum on the manuscript's restoration and that the project was "not a commercial enterprise," the sentiment would carry more weight if claims made about the text were not so hyperbolic. For example, it is highly questionable that this is "the most significant archaeological discovery in 60 years," as National Geographic News subjectively reported, or that "this lost gospel ... bears witness to something completely different from what was said [about Judas] in the Bible."

Just before the documentary aired, another book, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel*, set the stage for the new debate. Its author is one of the éminences grises of Gnostic studies, James M. Robinson, who oversaw the English translation and editing of the famous collection of Gnostic texts, or codices, found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Robinson's goal in *The Secrets of Judas* was to outline the history of the gospel, but also to highlight the problems of establishing its authenticity.

If you thought that the [newly discovered gospel](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament-gospels/53328.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament-gospels/53328.aspx>) would give any extra insight into the mind of Judas—as to why he betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide or was assassinated (depending on which account you accept)—then you were bound to be disappointed. Little was reported in the publicity surrounding this work that could not be deduced from reading the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Okay, in the gospel bearing his name, Judas doesn't come out as the stereotypical bad guy. He is rather the only disciple who really understood Jesus' mission. Instead of being the villain, Judas has suddenly morphed into the good guy. But despite the hype surrounding the document, it has not increased our understanding of Jesus Christ or even of Judas. On the contrary, a year after its release, it seems that efforts to merchandise the newly translated gospel mirror the traditional New Testament portrayal of Judas: preoccupied with money more than with truth.

The only available codex (as early books were known) containing the [Gospel of Judas](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality/the_gospel_of_judas/2038.aspx) (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality/the_gospel_of_judas/2038.aspx) in the Coptic language dates from about the fourth or fifth century. It is generally accepted as a faithful rendering of the Greek original. However, although the original purports to be the hurriedly written true memories of the disciple Judas before (as the New Testament records) he took his life, the gospel contains a number of anachronisms that betray it as a product of the second century—the period when a number of other Gnostic gospels were written. As University of Aberdeen professor Simon Gathercole reported (BBC Radio 4, March 19, 2006), it is rather like “discovering a speech of Queen Victoria where she talks about her fondness for *The Lord of the Rings* and the great CD collection she has.” This gospel simply removes both Jesus and Judas from their first-century Jewish milieu and places them in the very Hellenistic, philosophical environment of second-century Gnostic communities. The writers'

Gnostic beliefs come through clearly. (See [“Christianity’s Tangled Roots \(/node/544\)”](#) and [“Orthodoxy: Just Another Heresy? \(/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D145\)”](#).)

Unlike the New Testament Gospels, this Gnostic version offers little or no detail of Jesus’ life. Presented largely as a discourse between Jesus and the disciples and then Jesus and Judas, it is similar to the Gnostic gospels of Mary and Thomas.

Why, then, was the Gospel of Judas published with such flourish and fanfare?

FROM GRAY MARKET TO MASS MARKET

A number of factors have converged to make this manuscript so intriguing. First, its ownership is at issue. It came to light in the 1970s, although some speculate that it may have been part of the original Nag Hammadi discovery. As an archaeological treasure, it is strictly the property of the nation of Egypt. But it was illegally exported and was on the antiquities gray market for more than two decades, rapidly deteriorating because of neglect and abusive handling.

During this time the codex was offered to several prestigious universities, all of which declined because of the excessive price demanded and the lack of provenance, or details of its origin and discovery. Gnostics scholar Elaine Pagels of Princeton University detailed her own experience with the manuscript’s early handling in a recent interview with *Vision*: “I received a call from a dealer in Cleveland who told me he had a text he wanted me to see; he wanted me to publish the Gospel of Judas. I was startled. I thought, ‘How does this man know there actually was one?’ He told me to check his credentials. I found out that he was a reputable dealer, but then he never returned my phone calls after he’d pursued me for two weeks. I realized, of course, that the text was stolen and couldn’t be sold legally.”

Pagels continued, “I was talking to a trustee of Princeton, who has given many rare books to the university, to see whether he might be interested in buying the text, having it photographed, and then formally returning it to Egypt. This would have to be done to make it legal. We were discussing that option when the dealer asked me to come to Cleveland to see it.

“So I went, and he showed me a title page, which very clearly said, ‘The Gospel According to Judas.’ Then he showed me five pages that looked very familiar, like a lot of other texts we see. But they were not a dialogue between Jesus and Judas. So I thought, ‘He’s hyping it, saying that’s what it is to jack up the price. It’s not that at all; it’s just some kind of rather conventional Coptic prayer.’ It turns out, as I learned in September 2006, that before it was

published, the dealer assumed that the title *preceded* the pages. What he didn't know, even though he deals in Coptic texts, is that the title is often placed at the end, so the preceding 26 pages was the Gospel of Judas, and I didn't see those at all. What he'd shown me was five pages of *Allogenes*. They sounded very familiar, and certainly nothing of the kind that he'd described."

The manuscript was subsequently held in Europe by a private collector who finally undertook the long-overdue preservation and translation of the document.

TIME AND MONEY

The second reason for publishing the Gospel of Judas is that the time was right to capitalize on such a document. Much publicity has been given to the Gnostics and their writings by the runaway success of *The Da Vinci Code*. The reading public appears to have an appetite for such material, suggesting that the holder of the Judas manuscript and the National Geographic Society hoped to gain some financial benefit out of the gospel before it returned to its rightful home in Egypt.

Some say it was much more than fortuitous timing, however. Marvin Meyer, a member of the translation team and professor of Bible and Christian studies at California's Chapman University, expressed surprise at the level of public interest in the document when it was released. In a lecture at the University of Judaism, Los Angeles, he credited the success to the resources and marketing skills of the National Geographic Society.

Another factor keeping the subject alive is what could be referred to as the backlash effect. With its unorthodox view of Judas as the one disciple who really understood the needs of Jesus, enabling Him to be crucified so that He could escape His physical body, the document stirred a critical response from those who hold to the orthodox view of Scripture. Several books discussing Judas and his newly translated gospel have hit the newsstands. Tom Wright, bishop of Durham and one of the Church of England's leading scholars, has written Judas and the *Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth About Christianity?* Gathercole's *The Gospel of Judas: Rewriting Early Christianity* is due for release later this year. Meanwhile, the supporters of Judas have numerous additional books at various stages in the publishing process. And the bookstore cash registers keep ringing.

THE ACADEMIC DIVIDE

Of greater import, and largely hidden from the public gaze, is the debate in academic circles among those who specialize in Gnostic literature. The gospel has divided them into two camps: Pagels is among those who support the current translation, while others, such as April DeConick of Rice University, see it as being fundamentally flawed to the point that wrong conclusions have been drawn. To DeConick, Judas is the bad guy even in his own gospel.

The longer the translation and copies of the original manuscript are available to academics, the greater the clamor that the translation is, in fact, wrong. At a conference organized by the Sorbonne University in Paris, DeConick cautiously presented her views of the translation problems and the faulty conclusions based on them. To her amazement, two other Gnostics scholars from different parts of the world presented similar conclusions. None of them had communicated their concerns to others before making their presentations at the conference.

Subsequently, at the annual Society of Biblical Literature conference in Washington, D.C. (November 2006), attendees listened and responded eagerly to a presentation by professor Craig Evans of Acadia Divinity College, in which he, too, expressed concern about the translation. Evans, like Pagels, had been part of the original team assembled by the National Geographic Society to launch the Gospel of Judas. As a panelist, he was in a good position to understand some of the pressures that had gone into the gospel's release.

The problem for the academic community is not just the translation. The codex had been allowed to deteriorate to a point where pages had to be rebuilt like a jigsaw puzzle. The job would have been demanding even under the best of circumstances, and the team assembled to undertake it proved too small for the task. No one was on hand to corroborate or validate the placement of words or sections of the text. Consequently, when the document was eventually subjected to examination by other experts, alternative suggestions arose for the placement of fragments and the meaning of the text.

Scholars are eager to see photographs of the original pages as pieced together. Until they are available and the reconstruction of the puzzle can be established, everyone is guessing. Gnostics scholar Karen King told *Vision* that, despite her confidence in the team who did the initial work, "it's impossible to say what we think about what they did until we can see the actual text, and they've not given universal access to the papyrus itself. As I said in the translation I did for the book Elaine [Pagels] and I wrote, everything is tentative until you can see the papyrus."

One can't help speculating that in a desire to get the project to market and contain costs, the National Geographic Society cut corners on quality control. But then, other readings are unlikely to have been as sensational or to have produced the initial results that this one did.

A LONG-STANDING DEBATE

Although this is the first copy of the Gospel of Judas to be seen in the modern world, we have been aware of such a document through the writings of Irenaeus of Lyon, who castigated a Gospel of Judas as heresy in his writings toward the end of the second century (Against Heresies 1.31.1).

Like Irenaeus, Epiphanius, who wrote in the late fourth century, linked the gospel to a Gnostic group called the Cainites, who took their name from Abel's murderer, Cain. Epiphanius detailed the group's beliefs, showing how they revered anyone who earned the scorn of the biblical writers (*Panarion* 38).

We are now in a position to evaluate the newfound gospel and to see whether it substantiates the claims of Irenaeus and Epiphanius. At first glance, this document certainly has some similarities to the one known only from history, but it also differs in some respects, making a clear link difficult at best.

One thing is sure, however. For various reasons, from money to academic debate to public demand, the story of Judas and his gospel is unlikely to go away soon.