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REVIEW

The Gospel of Judas or Queen Victoria's CD Collection?

Peter Nathan

Timed to generate a new debate this Easter season, the latest pseudo-Christian publication is a translation of the Gospel of Judas, together with a companion book *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, which deals with the purchase and translation of the document. Both titles are published by the National Geographic Society and are to be launched with the showing of a documentary, covering much of the material of the second book. At the same time, another book on this Gospel is being launched by one of the *eminence grise* of Gnostic Studies, James Robinson who oversaw the translation and editing of the Nag Hammadi texts. Professor Robinson's goal is also to outline the history of the Gospel of Judas but also to highlight the problems of establishing its authenticity.

If you think that this newly discovered Gospel will give any extra insight into the mind of Judas—as to why he betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide—then you will be disappointed. Little has been reported in the publicity surrounding this work that cannot be deduced from reading the accepted Gospel accounts of Judas's actions recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Okay, he doesn't come out as the bad guy normally portrayed. But despite the hype surrounding the release of this document, it is unlikely to increase or influence understanding of Jesus Christ or even of Judas.

If authentic, the copy of the Gospel under discussion dates from about the fourth or fifth century with the original probably having been written by the mid-second century, at the same time as a number of other Gnostic Gospels.

Rather than being the hurriedly written true memories of Judas, before he took his life (as recorded by Matthew and Luke), the Gospel apparently has a number of anachronisms which betray its writing in the second century. As one scholar reported, the Gospel is like “discovering a speech of Queen Victoria where she talks about her fondness for *The Lord of the Rings* and her great CD collection” (Simon Gathercole on *BBC Radio 4*, Sunday March 19, 2006). This Gospel simply removes both Jesus and Judas from their first-century Jewish milieu and places them in a very Hellenistic, philosophical environment, characteristic of the Gnostic communities. The Gnostic values of the writers are clearly obvious. (See “[Christianity’s Tangled Roots \(/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-tangled-roots/775.aspx\)](#)” and “[Orthodoxy: Just Another Heresy? \(http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D145\)](#)”).

Why publish now? Firstly, the ownership of the codex is at issue. It first came to light in the 1970s, but may have been originally discovered in 1947 as part of the Nag Hammadi codices discovered in Egypt. It is legally the property of the nation of Egypt, but was illegally exported and has been on the antiquities gray market for more than two decades. During this time the codex has been offered to prestigious universities, which have always declined the offers because of the excessive price demanded and its lack of provenance. Since 2001, it has been held in Europe by a private collector who has undertaken the preservation and translating of the document. Secondly, the time is right to capitalize on such a document. Much publicity has been given to the Gnostics and their writings through the runaway success of the Da Vinci Code. The reading public appears to have an appetite for such material. Hence the holder of the document can possibly make some profit out of the Gospel before it is returned to its rightful home in Egypt.

Although this is the first copy of the Gospel of Judas to be seen in the modern world, we have been aware of it through the writings of Irenaeus of Lyon who castigated a Gospel of Judas as a heresy in his writings towards the end of the second century (*Against Hereies* 1: 31:1). Subsequently Epiphanius—late fourth century—linked the Gospel of Judas to a Gnostic group called the Cainites who took their name from Cain, who murdered Abel (*Panarion* A38, H/D2). Epiphanius detailed their beliefs showing how they revered those who earned the scorn of the biblical writers. Now we will be able to evaluate the Gospel and see whether the claims of both Irenaeus and Epiphanius are in any way supported by the newfound Gospel.

