

BOOK REVIEW

The Gospel of Judas

Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, editors, with additional commentary by Bart D. Ehrman. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2006. 186 pages. (ISBN: 1-4262-0042-0).

Reviewed by Steven Armstrong, Ph.D. (abd), Rosicrucian Park Research Librarian, San José, CA, USA.

“Jesus said, ‘Come, that I may teach you about secrets no person has ever seen. For there exists a great and boundless realm, whose extent no generation of angels has seen, in which there is a great invisible Spirit, which no eye of angel has ever seen, no thought of the heart has ever comprehended, and it was never called by any name.’” – *Judas* 47.

The whole story of the discovery, near loss, and recovery of the Codex Tchacos is, in itself, an amazing tale of greed, intrigue and finally the triumph of scholarship and reason. Originally discovered in an illegal operation circa 1978 near El Minya in central Egypt, this invaluable Coptic codex probably dates from the 3rd – 4th century CE, and contains materials that are copies of even older texts.

The 66 pages of the Coptic codex contains four tractates:

- An edition of the Letter of Peter to Philip (also contained in Nag Hammadi Codex VIII)
- A tractate *James*, similar to the *First Revelation of James* (Nag Hammadi Codex V)
- *The Gospel of Judas*, which was known to have existed in antiquity, but this is the first copy discovered
- A tractate, *Allogenes*, (*The Stranger*), previously unknown.

The National Geographic Society has been in the forefront of publishing this important find, and many ancillary materials as well, making this one of the best presentations of a scholarly discovery to date. The resources, ranging from popular to scholarly, which National Geographic has provided include the following, beginning in the spring of 2006:

- An extensive website at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/> which includes photographic reproductions of the full Coptic text of the Judas material for scholars and students to examine, as well as the full preliminary English translation of the *Gospel of Judas*; explanations of scientific techniques used in the authentication and conservation of the codex, as well as contextual timelines, maps, etc. The website is primarily for the general public, but some of its features, such as the photographic reproductions of the actual Coptic texts, will be of use to specialized interests as well.
- A two-hour popular, but scientifically accurate, documentary about the whole project, first broadcast on cable, and subsequently available on DVD.

- *The Gospel of Judas*, a preliminary translation of one of the tractates from the Codex, together with commentary, published in the spring of 2006, the subject of the current review.
- Herbert Krosney's engaging account of the context, history, discovery, loss and recovery and publication of the Codex, focusing primarily on the *Gospel of Judas*, published as *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*.¹
- A forthcoming critical edition of the whole Codex Tchacos, scheduled for publication in the fall of 2006, which will be the primary scholarly tool for studying these texts.

Although the publication timing and media attention surrounding the *Gospel of Judas* may sometimes have seemed poised to take advantage of the alternate theories regarding Christianity posed by the May release of *The DaVinci Code* movie, this may well have been a coincidence. The project had been underway for some time, and the timing may simply have been fortuitous for National Geographic.

The importance of the discovery of such ancient documents as those contained in the Codex Tchacos cannot be underestimated for our understanding of the milieu of early Christianity and the Mediterranean world. Just a hundred years ago, comparatively few "alternate" Judeo-Christian scriptures from the first centuries CE were known from those sources that the mainstream heresiologists particularly condemned, the (so-called²) "Gnostics"³ and Manichaeans. In testimony to this period, John Alego has just edited a handsome centennial edition of G.R.S. Mead's eleven classic essays on the then-known "Gnostic" texts, *Echoes from the Gnosis*.⁴

Until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices in 1945, the studies of Mead and Carl Jung, Hans Jonas, Eric Voegelin and a handful of other scholars had to rely on the few surviving "Gnostic" texts and the commentaries of their ancient adversaries, in particular, Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 130 – 202 CE) and Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus (ca. 310 – 403 CE). Irenaeus, a Greek Bishop in southern France, was the most eloquent of the two, and when he was not critiquing other beliefs, Irenaeus' positive statements of his own spirituality in *Against the Heresies*⁵ can be truly inspiring. By contrast, Epiphanius' *Medicine Chest (Panarion)*, only recently available in a full English edition,⁶ lacks some of the literary and spiritual heights of Irenaeus, but is a very valuable source of citations and descriptions of alternate viewpoints on the Christian path.

Manichaean texts suffered much the same treatment at the hands of adversaries such as Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) in Roman North Africa. It was not until 1900 that actual Manichaean texts were discovered, and additional Manichaean finds have continued throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.⁷ Scholars of other forms of Jewish and Christian Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha have not had as many difficulties in recovering sources. Since these works were apparently not deemed as threatening by mainstream authorities as those by the "Gnostics" and Manichaeans, they survived more easily. For example, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Odes of Solomon* and the *Protevangelion of James* have had considerable amount of influence on official Christian customs and thought.⁸

Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, even when “Gnostic” texts were discovered, they were often neglected. A good example is *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. The major portion of this important ancient work was discovered in the Akhmim Codex (Berlin Codex) in 1896, a collection dating from the 5th century CE, which contained not only the *Gospel of Mary*, but also *The Apocryphon of John*, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* and the *Acts of Peter*. Astonishing as it may seem to us today, this Codex was not translated until 1950, and the *Gospel of Mary* was finally published in 1955.⁹ Other fragments of the *Gospel of Mary* were discovered in 1938 and 1983, and today, in the upsurge of interest in “Gnostic” Christian literature following the success of the Nag Hammadi Library, there are two popular editions of this important Coptic “Gnostic” text.¹⁰

The days of neglect are thankfully past, and this edition of the *Gospel of Judas* is presented in a popular, slender volume aptly suited to either study or travel reading, and I imagine that it will take its place in airport bookshops next to Elaine Pagels’ recent work, *Beyond Belief*, contrasting the *Gospel of Thomas* with the *Gospel of John*.¹¹ It is happy to hope that we are gradually returning to the diversity and cosmopolitan spiritual tastes of ancient Alexandria, at least in certain quarters.

This is no mean accomplishment. The well-known specialists who contributed to this volume have ably struck a balance between uncompromisingly good scholarship and popular readability. Anyone who is fond of watching cable channel documentaries on the ancient world will find this a good read, engaging and challenging, but not pedantic. On the other hand, students and scholars will enjoy it as well, whetting their appetite for the critical edition of the Codex Tchacos scheduled for publication later in 2006. One can hope that volumes such as this and Dr. Pagels’ work will spark an ever-greater popular interest in this vital and formative period of western culture and spirituality.

The volume itself is divided into six major sections. First, Marvin Meyer of Chapman University, who been a major force in bringing alternate Christian scriptures to the public’s attention¹², gives an overview of the Gospel and its history in a concise and clear introduction.

Next, the text of the Gospel itself is presented, translated by the team of Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, with the collaboration of François Gaudart. The English is very readable, in the style we have come to expect from modern editions of ancient scriptures, such as the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The text is accompanied on each page by copious textual notes, as well as explanatory notes discussing the themes of the Gospel, its relationship to the canonical Gospels, and to other ancient sources.

While the actual Gospel itself only runs 26 pages, it is at turns surprising, challenging, funny and inspiring. It is indeed significant that in the original Coptic, as the commentators note, this is the *Gospel of Judas*, not, as is usual for Gospels, the *Gospel according to Judas*. This work is intended to be the Good News about *Judas*, the true

Gnostic, who follows the inner voice, which is liberated in him by his teacher, Jesus. Whether one ultimately accords this text the same value as other Gospels, it is a priceless window into our ancestors' striving for Gnosis.

Perhaps the most breathtaking realization is that no one has read this work for at least 1600 years, and that we are doing so through an amazing set of circumstances. The history of the Codex is briefly rehearsed in the next section, "The Story of the Codex Tchacos and the Gospel of Judas," by Rodolphe Kasser, a leading philologist, archaeologist and expert in Coptic.¹³ While the full saga is told in Krosney's *The Lost Gospel*, Kasser gives us just enough information so that we can understand the greed and perfidy of the Codex' original owner, the short-sightedness of the academic community for so long while the papyrus languished, rapidly degrading in a Citibank safe-deposit box in Hicksville NY, and finally the heroism of Frieda Tchacos Nussbeger and the Maecenas Foundation who rescued the Codex and began its conservation, authentication and translation. Kasser manages all this with understandable scorn for the villains of the story, but also a good sense of humor, noting that as Jesus laughs in this Gospel, so must we to know that its message has finally survived.

Bart D. Ehrman contributed the next section, "Christianity Turned on its Head: the Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas." Ehrman, from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has played a major role in educating both the academic community and the public about the diversity of early Christian approaches and scriptures.¹⁴ A well respected scholar, he is also not afraid of controversy, with titles such as *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, *The Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* and *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* among his nineteen books so far.

Ehrman provides a context for the *Gospel of Judas*, reviewing for the reader the period of its composition, "Gnostic" religions in general and their beliefs, as well as the specific group that Irenaeus claimed were the authors of this Gospel, the Cainites, those who supposedly reversed many of the heroes and villains in the Bible. He then succinctly contrasts the treatment of Judas in the Canonical Gospels and in the *Gospel of Judas*. Following this he proceeds to analyze how the *Gospel of Judas* views various controversial topics of its day, including the nature of God, the Christ, Salvation and the Disciples. In each case, the present text takes a starkly differing viewpoint from that of the orthodox scriptures. Finally, Ehrman returns to one of his most important themes, the multiplicity of early Christianities, and how one of these "won out," and sought to marginalize the others. For those unfamiliar with the milieu of early Christianity, this will be an excellent introduction. For students of the period, it will serve as a stimulating conversation of how this new text fits into the larger context.

In the fifth section, "Irenaeus of Lyon and the Gospel of Judas," Gregor Wurst gives us a brief discussion of how the Gospel of Judas fits the description of this work in the heresiological work of Irenaeus of Lyon. Wurst, from the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Augsburg, Germany is a noted expert in Manichaean and Coptic studies, and a member of the Nag Hammadi editorial board.¹⁵ His explanations provide a

clear demonstration of how scholars use history and textual comparison to approximate a date for documents such as these. In this case, he illustrates that the work must predate 180 CE, since this is the date of Irenaeus' writing which condemns the Gospel, and this also suggests that the Sethian school of "Gnosticism" was extant before Irenaeus wrote his heresiological treatise, which is a significant discovery in the history of this period.

The final article in the book is once again by Marvin Meyer, "Judas and the Gnostic Connection." Meyer explains the "Gnostic" mythos in considerable detail, and in particular, shows how the *Gospel of Judas* relates and connects to the major themes and figures of this belief system. The existence of these themes and figures in a Gospel which is demonstrably so early is important to the overall study of "Gnosticism," since, as Wurst pointed out in the last section, this would be a very early work in the Sethian tradition, proving what many had suspected, that Sethian Gnosis was very early, and perhaps even had pre-Christian roots.¹⁶ This section is an excellent introduction to the ancient myth of Gnosis, which often appears convoluted and confusing to modern readers.

The only quibble this reviewer had with the layout of the book was the currently popular use of "numberless notes" in every section except the Gospel text itself. Modern publishing concerns must feel that note numbers in the text will put off the general reader, and so have resorted to an endnotes section with page number references. However, for the researcher, this is an inconvenience, since one cannot know if there is a note to any particular part of the text without flipping back and forth to the endnotes. Nevertheless, if this is the price to pay to get this material out to a wider public, so be it.

With its clear explanations and information, this edition of the *Gospel of Judas* and commentaries is an excellent introduction to, not only the text itself, but the context and history of the period. It should serve both students and casual readers well, and, with any luck, National Geographic's approach to publicizing and disseminating important scholarly discoveries such as this will catch on, to the betterment and edification of both scholars and the public, an outcome "devoutely to be wished."

"Look, you have been told everything. Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. The star that leads the way is your star." – *Judas* 57

The Gospel of Judas ... take it on your next plane, train or bus trip, and enter the world of ancient Alexandrian Gnosis, with a crew of very reliable guides!

¹ Krosney, Herbert, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*. (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006).

² On the question of whether or not to use the term, "Gnostic" as a collective designation, see the work of Michael Allen Williams and Karen King, reviewed in *The Rose+Croix Journal*, Vol 1, 2004, 85-88.

http://www.rosecroixjournal.org/issues/2004_vol_01/book_reviews/review-williams.pdf, Accessed June 1, 2006. San Jose: Grand Lodge of the English Language Jurisdiction, AMORC, 2004.

³ Throughout this review, in deference to the views of Williams and King (see note 2), the term “Gnostics” and “Gnosticism” will be enclosed in quotation marks, to indicate the unsettled debate about the use of this term for these ancient schools.

⁴ Mead, G.R.S., *Echoes from the Gnosis*. Edited by John Alego. Introduction by Robert Gilbert. Commentary by Stephan Hoeller. (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2006). Another of Mead’s classics is *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten; The Gnostics, A Contribution to the Study of the Origins of Christianity*, 1900. Reprinted with an introduction by Kenneth Rexroth. (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1960).

⁵ The writings of Irenaeus of Lyons are available in many editions, including on the internet, “Irenaeus of Lyons” at *Early Christian Writings*. Website. Accessed June 11, 2006. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/irenaeus.html>.

⁶ Epiphanius, Saint, Bp. of Constantia in Cyprus, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*. Translated by Frank Williams. 2 vols. (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1987-1994).

⁷ See “Manichaeism” at *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Website. Accessed June 11, 2006. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manichaeans>. For Manichaean finds in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, see Steven Armstrong. “The First Generation of Manichaeans and Other Communities in the Egyptian Deserts: Methodology, the Available Evidence, and Conclusions.” *Rose+Croix Journal* vol 1 2004: 10-49.

⁸ Many very useful collections of these works exist, including “Non-Canonical Literature” at Wesley Center Online. Website. Accessed June 11, 2006. http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/index.htm

⁹ “Gospel of Mary Magdalene” at *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Website. Accessed June 15, 2006. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Mary_Magdalene. “Berlin Codex” at *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Website. Accessed June 15, 2006. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akhmim_Codex.

¹⁰ *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, Translation from the Coptic and commentary by Jean-Yves Leloup; English translation and notes by Joseph Rowe; Foreword by Jacob Needleman. (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002); and King, Karen L., *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003).

¹¹ Pagels, Elaine, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003).

¹² See “Curriculum Vitae: Marvin Meyer,” Chapman University Department of Religious Studies. Website. Accessed June 15, 2006. <http://www1.chapman.edu/~meyer/> .

¹³ “Rodolph Kasser,” *Profiles*. Website. Accessed June 15, 2006. http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/Rodolphe_Kasser.html .

¹⁴ See “Bart D. Ehrman,” at *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Website. Accessed June 15, 2006. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart_D._Ehrman .

¹⁵ “Gregor Wurst,” *Profiles*. Website. Accessed June 15, 2006. http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/Gregor_Wurst.html .

¹⁶ The possibility of a pre-Christian origin for Sethian Gnosis is based on the possibility that the Nag Hammadi document, *The Apocalypse of Adam*, may be an example of Jewish “Gnosticism.” See MacRae, George, “Introduction to *The Apocalypse of Adam*” in James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 256.