

Expert Doubts 'Gospel of Judas' Revelation

Expert Predicts Mysterious 'Gospel of Judas' Won't Reveal Anything About Jesus' Infamous Disciple

By RICHARD N. OSTLING AP

Religion Writer The Associated Press

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NEW YORK - An expert on ancient Egyptian texts is predicting that the "Gospel of Judas" a manuscript from early Christian times that's nearing release amid widespread interest from scholars will be a dud in terms of learning anything new about Judas.

James M. Robinson, America's leading expert on such ancient religious texts from Egypt, predicts in a new book that the text won't offer any insights into the disciple who betrayed Jesus. His reason: While it's old, it's not old enough.

"Does it go back to Judas? No," Robinson told The Associated Press on Thursday.

The text, in Egypt's Coptic language, dates from the third or fourth century and is a copy of an earlier document. The National Geographic Society, along with other groups, has been studying the "Judas" text.

The society said Thursday it will release its report on the document "within the next few weeks" but didn't specify whether that would come via a book, magazine article or telecast.

Robinson has not seen the text that National Geographic is working on, but assumes it is the same work assailed by Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons around A.D. 180.

Irenaeus said the writings came from a "Cainite" Gnostic sect that jostled against orthodox Christianity. He also accused the Cainites of lauding the biblical murderer Cain, the Sodomites and Judas, whom they regarded as the keeper of secret mysteries.

National Geographic's collaborators on the translation and interpretation of the text include its current owner Mario Roberti's Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art in Basel, Switzerland and the Waitt Institute for Historical Discovery in La Jolla, Calif. Rodolphe Kasser, formerly of the University of Geneva, is the editor.

Robinson writes that the journey of the text to Switzerland was "replete with smugglers, black-market antiquities dealers, religious scholars, backstabbing partners and greedy entrepreneurs." In the process, Robinson fears, the fragile text may have been mishandled and parts of it lost forever.

Robinson is an emeritus professor at Claremont (Calif.) Graduate University, chief editor of religious documents found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, and an international leader among scholars of Coptic manuscripts.

He says the text is valuable to scholars of the second century but dismissed the notion that it'll reveal unknown biblical secrets. He speculated the timing of the release is aimed at capitalizing on interest in the film version of "The Da Vinci Code" a fictional tale that centers on a Christian conspiracy to cover up a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

"There are a lot of second-, third- and fourth-century gospels attributed to various apostles," Robinson

said. "We don't really assume they give us any first century information."

A National Geographic response said "it's ironic" for Robinson to raise such questions since for years "he tried unsuccessfully to acquire this codex himself, and is publishing his own book in April, despite having no direct access to the materials."

National Geographic said it practiced "due diligence" with scholars "to save the manuscript before it turns to dust and is lost forever" and that everyone involved is committed to returning the materials to Egypt.

In "The Secrets of Judas," a HarperSanFrancisco book on sale April 1, Robinson will describe secretive maneuvers in the United States, Switzerland, Greece and elsewhere over two decades to sell the "Judas" manuscript.

He writes that he was approached about purchasing a group of manuscripts in 1983 and arranged for colleague Stephen Emmel, now at the University of Muenster, Germany, to meet in Geneva with go-betweens for the owner.

Emmel got a glimpse of the text but didn't know it was the "Gospel of Judas" till years later. He was told the original asking price was \$10 million but it could be obtained for \$3 million, an impossibly high figure for the interested Americans.

From there, Robinson traces a twisted sales trail through years and continents to this year's impending release.

Emmel is now a member of the National Geographic team along with other former students of Robinson, who hopes his colleagues will be providing solid information about the text's history and location.

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